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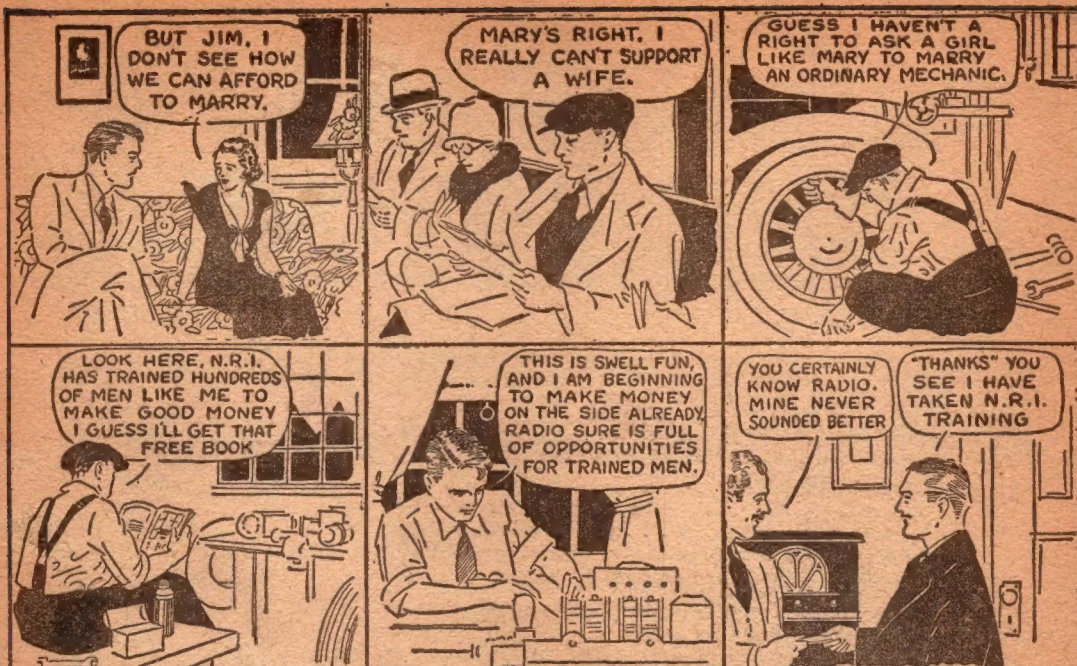
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ACES
BACKED

by GALEN C. COLIN

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COWBOY SHORT STORIES

10¢

VOL. II, NO. 3

SEPT., 1939

12 WILD WESTERN STORIES

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COWBOY SHORT STORIES, published every other month by BLUE RIBBON MAGAZINES, INC., 1 Appleton Place, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial and executive offices, 60 Hudson St., New York, N. Y. Application for second-class matter entered at the postoffice at Holyoke, Mass. Yearly subscription, 60c. Copyright 1939.



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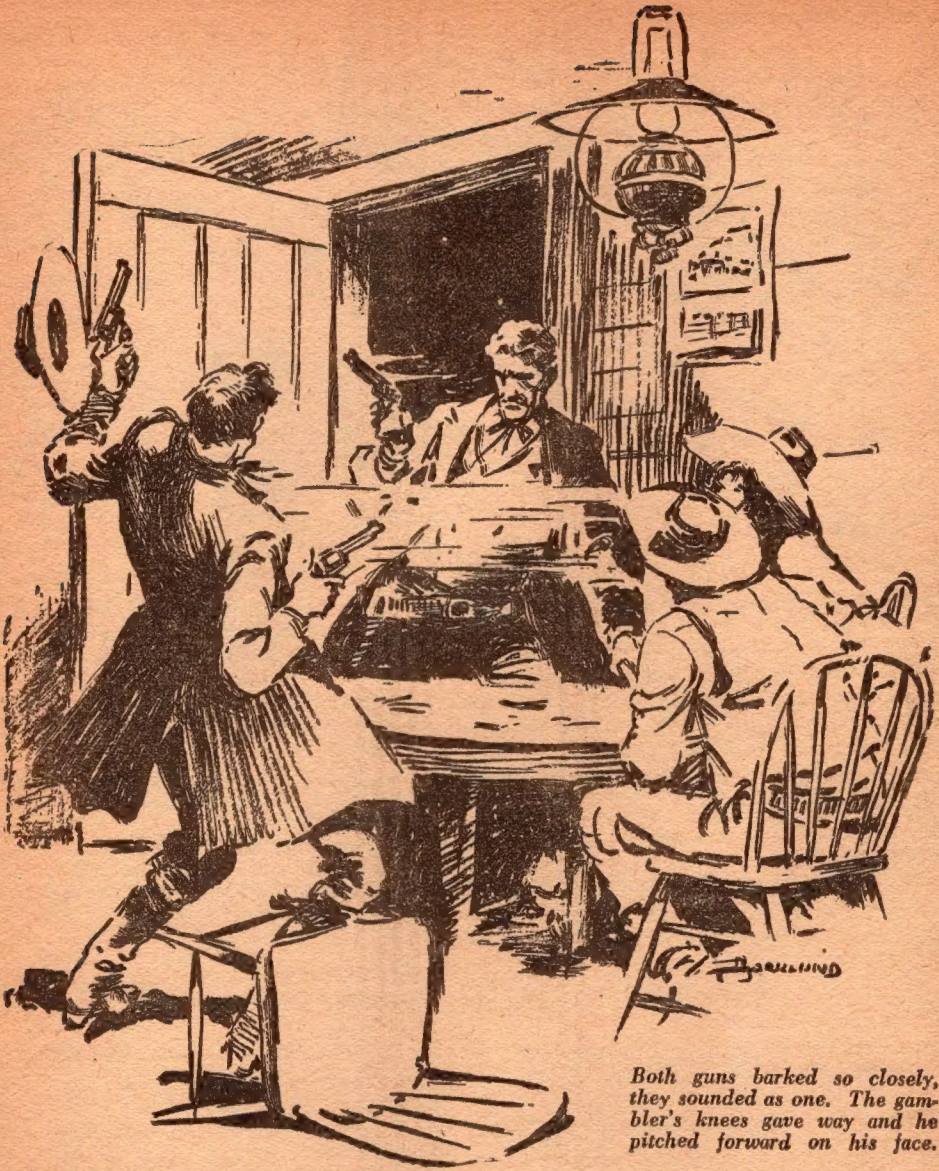
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Both guns barked so closely, they sounded as one. The gambler's knees gave way and he pitched forward on his face.

ACES BACKED

by
GALEN C. COLIN



THERE were those in Circle City who said later that they had always known Cal Jackson was not the meek, quiet saddle-maker he appeared to be. But Nels Sigurd, Buck Roman, Dave Hall and his few other close friends were not among them. And if a hint of Cal Jackson's past had ever cropped out, they would certainly have known it.

Nels Sigurd, blond, stocky Swede bronc-twister, did not sense it, as he stood beside Cal Jackson in the door of the little saddle-shop. There was always that faraway look in Cal Jackson's deep-set, steely eyes, that tightening of thin lips, on stage day. This day was no different than the others.

"Old Tonopah Saunders is carryin' passengers today—right important ones." The stage was still a half mile down the Salgado trail, blanketed in a cloud of dust. But the slender, graying man spoke with certain assurance.

Nels Sigurd nodded. "Yeah. Showin' off. Throwin' leather plenty across them cayuses. Someday he'll lose a wheel on the turn, an' pile up the stage against Tom Bennington's Bank."

Cal Jackson leaned his left shoulder against the door jamb, and eased his weight onto his left foot. He had worn that peg leg for ten years, but the stump, where it rested in the fork, had never lost its tenderness—had never let him forget the right leg, buried in boot-hill two hundred miles north.

Nels Sigurd shot a glance down the lean length of the saddle-maker, but did not appear to notice the twinge of pain on the finely chiseled, stern-lipped face. There had been a little curiosity in Circle City about

Cal Jackson's peg leg, when he arrived five years before. But the look in his steel-blue eyes, the tightening of his lips, had nipped that curiosity for good.

Cal Jackson was an expert saddle-maker, minded his own business—made few friends, but firm ones. And after all, Circle City was more interested in a man's present conduct than his past history. It was none of Circle City's business, if he wanted to stick closely to his little shop. Nothing to get excited about that he did not drink or gamble in the "Ace-in-the-Hole" Saloon, across the street.

CERTAINLY Nels Sigurd, slow-moving and slow-thinking, did not sense that the stage was carrying powder for an explosion that would set Circle City on its ears, as the lumbering old Concord swept around the corner by Bennington's Bank.

Old Tonopah Saunders hunched forward on his seat, the strings of the eight-horse team gathered in his gnarled old hands. His broad, dust-covered hat was swept back from his grizzled hair, and his square chin was thrust out. When the stage righted itself to four wheels, the old driver turned his head aside and sent a stream of tobacco juice to the dust. His right hand, holding half the lines, lifted, and the lash of his long whip sizzled out over the horses' backs.

"Hi'yup, yuh broomtails!" His shrill yelp carried clear to the two men in the door.

The rumble of wheels and the pound of hoofs wakened the little town. Doors swung open along the single street of rickety buildings. Men hurried out onto the ramshackle

Cal Jackson, the saddle-maker, with the stamp of the gun-hawk in his eyes, was content to stay at peace . . . until that red moment of blinding hate, when a cold-deck tinhorn with a killer's heart, sought to blacken the reputation of the squarest gambler ever to notch a Colt!



sidewalks and scurried toward the Ace-in-the-Hole Saloon. The saloon itself disgorged a dozen or more who had been drowsing the hot afternoon away in the only two-story building in Circle City.

The stage shrieked to a halt. Two men leaped to the leaders' heads, and grasped the bits. Tonopah Saunders leaned forward with a flourish, and wound the lines around the whip-socket. Then he clambered down by way of the front hub.

But Cal Jackson's eyes were not upon the old driver, or the cluster of men in front of the saloon. His lids were narrowed, and behind them, smoldering eyes held intently upon the three huge, round-topped trunks roped to the top of the stage.

His thin lips moved wordlessly, as he stared at the painted inscription on the end of the trunk nearest him. And it was an unusual brand—one that would attract attention anywhere. A huge ace of spades that covered fully half the expanse of trunk end, and below it, in heavy black letters, the name "Barton."

Nels Sigurd had caught the strange inscription, too. He half turned to Cal Jackson. He blinked, startled at the intent, grim look on the slender saddle-maker's face. His own gaze swept back to the stage. Then he shook his head. Those brands meant nothing to him.

Two men clambered to the top of the old Concord, and loosed the ropes that bound the trunks. They grunted, as they lifted them down to waiting hands below. The stage door opened—then closed with a bang. "All out!" Tonopah Saunders called.

He unwound the lines and shook them out over the horses. The men at the bits leaped aside. The cayuses burst into a dead run, headed for the postoffice a block up the street. But Cal Jackson's gaze did not follow the lumbering old vehicle. Instead, it held upon the man who stood at the edge of the sidewalk.

A slender, six-foot hombre, with straight back and widespread legs. Dressed in store clothes of black broadcloth, with highly polished boots, silk shirt, and soft, dove-gray Stetson. A gun-belt around his middle was weighted down by a pair of silver-mounted, pearl-handled six-guns.

A darkly handsome face, with high-bridged nose, flashing black eyes, and a little iron-gray mustache. A mouth that twisted a little too closely to a sneer, and eyes a trifle too close together. But in spite of that, a commanding figure.

"Looks kind o' ringy!" Nels Sigurd grunted. "Wonder who he is—an' why he's come to Circle City with all them trunks?"

"I've heard of Ace Barton," Cal Jackson said softly, evenly.

"Ace Barton?" Nels Sigurd straightened. Then he nodded swiftly. "The brands on them trunks—they do read 'Ace Barton!'"

Now he spoke slowly, almost as if he were talking to himself. "Ace Barton—the squarest gambler thet ever riffled a deck! The fastest cross-draw artist on anybody's range! But a man to ride the river with!"

Abruptly he turned to Cal Jackson. "But I thought Ace Barton was pushin' up the daisies. Seems like I heerd a tin-horn drilled him, up San Felice way. Eight-ten years ago, as I remember!"

"Sometimes a bullet don't take. I recollect there was such a story goin' around—but that's Ace Barton's brand."

The two in the door of the saddle shop watched the crowd across the street. Under the stranger's directions, eager men carried the trunks into the Ace-in-the-Hole Saloon. The black-garbed hombre followed, and the rest pushed in behind him.

Cal Jackson still stood in the door, but there was a slow change taking place that Nels Sigurd could not help but notice. The peg-legged man's lips seemed to thin, and twist down slightly at the corners. His long, mobile fingers flexed, then clenched at his thighs.

Abruptly the bronc-twister moved. "While yuh're relinin' thet saddle-skirt, I'll lope across to the Ace-in-the-Hole, an' see what's up!"

CAL JACKSON drew a long breath, and tore his eyes away with an effort. He turned and stumped back to his bench. As he picked up the needle and waxed thread, Nels Sigurd stepped down from the sidewalk, and shuffled across the ankle-deep dust of the street.

During the hour that the stocky puncher was gone, Cal Jackson worked methodically—almost instinctively. But his mind was not upon the chased saddle-skirt, and there was a bitter twist to his lips. Things that he had thought were banished from his mind years ago returned to plague him. He hardly looked up, as Nels Sigurd's booted feet thumped on the sidewalk. But the bronc-twister's words brought him erect.

"It's Ace Barton, right enough! An'

blast me for a sheep-herder, if'n he ain't bought out Mick Moneyhan already! Aims to settle in Circle City for keeps!"

"Huh?" Cal Jackson's voice was higher, sharper than Nels Sigurd had ever heard it before. "Why did he pick Circle City?"

"Lowed he liked the name of the Ace-in-the-Hole—but figures on changin' it a little!"

He shot a glance back over his shoulder, then turned and gazed out of the window. "Ain't wastin' no time, Jackson! Got Squint Beeson workin' on thet sign a-ready!"

Cal Jackson laid down his needle carefully—then stumped to Nels Sigurd's side. Wordlessly they watched, as the Ace-in-the-Hole's handy-man, Squint Beeson, scraped the sun and wind-peeled letters from the saloon-front. He left the word, "Ace," and added in black paint the word "Barton's."

"Ace Barton's," Nels Sigurd grunted.

But Cal Jackson only said; "Just like Squint. Didn't bother to touch up the Ace. Looks sort o' frayed out at the end."

Nels Sigurd lingered in Jackson's saddle shop until the peg-legged saddle-maker finished the job of relining the saddle-skirt. But continually his eyes strayed to the saloon across the street. And when Cal Jackson finally lifted the kak from the clamps, Sigurd clutched it and made for the door.

A thin smile played across Cal Jackson's face, as he watched the stocky bronc-peeler heave the saddle onto his roan's back and buckle the cinch tight. Nor was he surprised when Sigurd straightened, whirled on his heel, and hurried across the street.

The peg-legged saddle-maker turned awkwardly on his left foot, and stumped back to the corner where a little desk held his thumbed account book, his few papers, and a half-dozen envelopes and sheets of paper. His shoulders hunched wearily, and the lines in his face were deeper than usual. But his steely eyes held a strange glint in their depths.

For a half hour he wrote slowly and laboriously. Then he addressed an envelope and placed the single folded sheet inside. He licked the flap and fumbled in the desk for a stamp. A few minutes later, he let himself out of the back door and plodded up the alley to the end of the block.

He entered the postoffice by the side door and stumped to the mailing slot. The postmaster, garrulous old Syme Polter, followed

him with questioning gaze. When Cal Jackson did not return the look, Syme hurried to the general delivery window.

"Heerd about Ace Barton, Jackson? Bought out Mick Moneyhan! Aimin' to—"

"Yeah! I heard!" the slender saddle-maker grunted.

Old Syme gulped at the steel-edged tone in Jackson's voice. He watched, goggle-eyed, as the peg-legged man clumped to the door.

"Somethin' shore rubbed his fur the wrong way!" he grunted, as he turned back to sort the mail for Tonopah Saunders' back trip.

During the days that followed, Cal Jackson pulled himself deeper and deeper into his shell. He watched the stage's arrival from inside his little shop now. He had showed himself on the street, but now he was never out of the shop or the two tiny rooms in the back.

An orange light burned late at night in those back rooms, and a chance watcher, who had dared to peer through the closely shuttered window, would have been startled at what was going on. He would hardly have recognized the slender, grim figure that practiced endlessly with the six-guns that weighted down his hips. He would have shivered at the cold, implacable look on Cal Jackson's lean face.

Nels Sigurd, Buck Roman and Dave Hall took turns in bringing the peg-legged saddle-maker news of what was going on across the street. At first they had nothing but praise for Ace Barton.

"Square gambler—jest like his reputation!" Nels Sigurd had said, three or four days after the saloon changed hands. "Mighty friendly, too—an' generous with his liquor! A heap more likeable than ol' Mick Moneyhan!"

A day or two later, Buck Roman was not quite so sure. There was a worried look in his clear eyes, and deep-etched lines on his broad, open face.

"He's playin' 'em square, as far as I can see. Got no kick on thet. But he's aimin' on importin' dance-gals, Cal. Don't know as we want anything like thet in Circle City. Drinkin' an' gamblin' is plenty. Hard enough to keep the hands at work now."

CAL JACKSON'S face hardened, and his voice held a steel edge. "That don't sound like Ace Barton, Buck! But—"

I reckon—it's his own business. Mebbe he's changed some with the years."

"I don't know, Cal," Buck Roman said gloomily. "I don't like it!" Then his eyes narrowed. "Been studyin' thet hombre. The set of his eyes ain't right." He nodded slowly. "Yeah—an' he's beginnin' to show off. Always practicin' that cross-draw of his. Faster than greased lightnin', he is. Keeps a waddy jumpy."

"I've heard that a draw needs plenty practice, Buck," Cal Jackson grunted. "An' likely he's proud of his gun-speed."

But it was Dave Hall's news that was the most disquieting of all—the news that set the fires gleaming in Cal Jackson's eyes—and set his fingers to itching for the feel of gun-butts.

Dave slipped into the little saddle-shop at sundown. Cal Jackson knew there was something worrying him, the moment he glimpsed the frown on the blond waddy's forehead, the deepened sun-wrinkles at the corners of Dave's eyes.

"Nels is ridin' for a spill, Cal!" Dave blurted out, the moment the door closed behind him. "An' blast it, he won't listen to me!"

"Yeah?" the peg-legged man said softly.

"Settin' across the table from Ace Barton every afternoon an' night!" Dave rasped. "Losin', slow but steady. Already dropped more than a thousand dollars—an' Nels can't afford thet."

Cal Jackson looked long at the worried puncher. Then his voice was deceptively low and soft. "Square game, Dave?"

Dave Hall looked quickly up at the saddle-maker, as if surprised at having his thoughts read. He shook his head uncertainly. "I—I don't know, Cal! If'n Ace Barton is dealin' 'em crooked, he's mighty slick at it. An' yuh know his reputation."

"A feller may change, Dave!"

The blond puncher's face tightened. "If'n I ever catch him dealin' a card off'n the bottom, I'll call his hand, an' smoke him up—plenty!"

Cal Jackson shook his head. "He could wait for you until your gun was out of the leather—an' drill you between the eyes before you could squeeze your trigger, Dave. Just set tight—an' watch. Let me know, if you get the dead-wood onto him!"

"An' let him slick Nels out o' his last—"

"Promise, Dave!" There was a tone in Cal Jackson's voice that Dave Hall had never heard before—a steel-edged, intense

tone that seemed out of place in the mild-mannered, quiet saddle-maker.

The blond waddy blinked, gulped—then nodded his head. "All right, Cal! I promise!"

But it was the day that Tonopah Saunders' stage brought Cal Jackson's letter that the showdown came. Old Syme Polter had scuttled down from the postoffice with the envelope. He stood, goggle-eyed in the doorway, as Jackson took the letter and stumped back to his little desk.

He watched with greedy curiosity, while the saddle-maker slit the envelope with a leather-knife, and drew the single sheet. But there was no change in expression on that lean face—no sign as to whether he was pleased or disappointed at the news the letter brought.

He rose and clumped halfway to the door, before he appeared to notice old Syme Polter in the opening. His eyes narrowed, as he stared at the grizzled postmaster. Polter's slack lips opened.

"Must have been important—thet letter, Jackson? Mebbe an answer to the one yuh writ couple of weeks ago, huh?"

Cal Jackson did not speak—only looked at and through the doddering man. Polter seemed to shrivel beneath the blaze in those steel-blue eyes. He hunched his shoulders, and gazed down at his scuffed boots.

"Of course—it ain't rightly—none of my business, Jackson. I was only askin'—"

Syme Polter's words trailed off. His mouth dropped open, and his watery eyes opened wide. Cal Jackson straightened with a jerk, teeth clicking and head bent forward, as if waiting for the sound to repeat.

For the sullen bellow of a six-gun had welled up from Ace Barton's, across the street. It set the still, hot air to trembling—rattled the window in the little saddle-shop.

Then the look of greedy curiosity swept back into Syme Polter's eyes. He turned on his heel and scuttled like a lizard across the thick dust of the street. Cal Jackson moved jerkily toward the door, long, mobile fingers clenching and unclenching at his sides.

He stood wide-legged in the doorway, forgetting this time to take his weight from the peg leg. Slowly his lean face changed—became a dead-white mask—a deadly cold and ruthless mask. Motionless and unblinking, he stood there, eyes upon the swinging door of Ace Barton's.

He saw Sheriff Molton race up the street

and duck into the saloon, but still he did not move. Minutes later, his gaze held upon four men, pushing from the swinging door—strained to see the face of the man they carried between them. He caught his breath, as the broad Stetson fell from the man's head, and revealed a shock of crisp blond hair.

Then the men, with their burden, were turning in to old Doc Sawyer's office, four doors up the street. Still Cal Jackson did not move. Now the saloon door opened again, and Dave Hall and Sheriff Molton came out, side by side. They stood on the sidewalk in front of Ace Barton's for a moment, and Cal Jackson could tell that they were arguing bitterly.

Abruptly the sheriff turned on his heel and strode back toward his office. Dave Hall hesitated uncertainly—then leaped from the sidewalk and sped across toward the saddle shop. Only now did Cal Jackson move.

When Dave Hall entered the shop, Jackson was at the back, fumbling in a brass-bound box. Dave hesitated in the doorway a moment, his eyes upon the slender, peg-legged man. Cal Jackson straightened and turned slowly, fumbling at his waist.

WHEN Dave Hall stepped toward him, the slender man was buckling a worn gun-belt about his middle. A pair of six-guns, with worn, fist-smooth walnut butts hung at Cal Jackson's thighs. And strangely to Dave Hall's eyes, they were not out of place. They gave added dignity and impressiveness to the quiet-mannered man—seemed to straighten his shoulders, to change his whole personality.

"Cal! Yuh're not—not—" Dave Hall burst out, as he took a long stride toward the saddle-maker.

"It was Nels, Dave? And he's dead?" Cal Jackson's voice was flat and toneless. His mouth, with the down-turned corners, barely opened to let the words slide out.

Dave Hall stared, wide-eyed. Then he nodded. "Yeah! Ace Barton drilled him! Nels called his hand for dealin' from the bottom! Drawed first—but he didn't have a chance against Ace Barton! The sheriff says it was self-defense—thet Barton is in the clear! If'n I hadn't promised—"

Cal Jackson took a stiff-legged step toward the door, his peg leg clicking. Dave Hall backed away before the deadly glare in the slender man's eyes. Then Jackson stopped, and his eyes narrowed. For a full

minute he stood motionless. At last he nodded, and turned back.

Dave Hall drew a deep breath of relief. "For a minute I thought yuh was goin' to swap lead with Ace Barton, Cal! An' I've seen thet hombre's draw! He'd plumb salivate—"

"I'm setting in the game tonight, Dave," Cal Jackson said evenly. "Countin' on you arranging to have Buck Roman and Ace Barton at the same table. And if Sheriff Molton was in the bar, it would be a help."

"Yuh're—goin' to — Ace Barton's? Yuh're aimin' to set in a poker game with that crooked killer?"

Cal Jackson nodded. "Got a hankerin' to flip the pasteboards again, Dave. Been a good many years. You'll do what I ask?"

"Shore, Cal! Yuh know thet! But yuh're hornin' into something thet yuh don't know anything about! He'll gun yuh down!"

A cold, mirthless smile, the first that Dave Hall had ever seen, flicked across Cal Jackson's face. "You might be surprised at how much I know about it, Dave!"

Dave Hall made the arrangements quietly, but there must have been something in his face or manner that communicated his tenseness to the denizens of Ace Barton's. For an air of hushed expectancy hung over the saloon that night.

Dave and Buck Roman were there, thin-lipped and silent. Sheriff Molton stood at the bar, frankly puzzled at why Dave had urged him to be present. A dozen other punchers and town-loafers drank Ace Barton's fiery tequila, or played half-heartedly at the rickety tables.

Only Ace Barton, himself seemed to act naturally. He swaggered among his customers, joking with some and slapping others on the back. But he avoided Buck Roman and Dave Hall, for it did not take a keen eye or discerning brain to read the hostility and hatred in the two punchers.

Every few minutes, Dave Hall pulled his heavy gold watch from his pocket and consulted it. When the hands stood at five minutes to eight, he and Buck moved toward a table near the front door. They caught Ace Barton's eye and gestured him toward them.

"Honin' to deal a few hands, Barton!" Hall grunted. "An' aimin' to be a little luckier than Nels Sigurd!"

If the saloon-keeper caught the implication in the puncher's words, he did not be-

tray it. An oily smile played across his face as he pulled out a chair and sat down.

"Yuh can be shore of a square deal when Ace Barton is settin' in," he said evenly. "Squarest gambler—an' quickest on the draw—on the whole range. Thet's my reputation, an' I'm backin' it up!"

He reached for the deck. Then his eyes swept the room. "We'll need another man or two to make the game interestin'! Hi, Stoney! Come an'—"

Dave Hall, who was facing the door, lifted his hand. "One more player is all we want—an' he's comin' in now!"

For a moment there was dead silence in the bar room, for every man was watching the front table—every man knew that the powder was laid, only waiting for a spark to ignite it. Then, above the silence came the thump—click—thump—click from the sidewalk outside. A sigh seemed to sweep the room.

The door swung open. For a moment Cal Jackson stood in the opening, the orange light from the swinging lamp bringing his slender form into bold relief. A long, quavering breath came from Dave Hall's lips. It was Cal Jackson—but he would never have known it, except for the lean, thin-lipped face and the smoldering blue eyes.

Gone were the well-worn Levis and flannel shirt, to make way for rich black broadcloth store clothes. Polished, inlaid black boots—one of them covering the peg leg. A dove-gray Stetson of a quality far beyond the reach of a puncher—or a saddle-maker. A white silk shirt and a somber black bow tie.

And hanging low at Jackson's thighs, a pair of worn-handled six-guns, butts turned forward. The breath hissed from Buck Roman's lips, as he looked back over his shoulder at the man in the door. A hissing breath—and wide, disbelieving eyes.

Then Cal Jackson strode into the saloon. Except for the clicking sound when the peg-filled boot hit the floor, no one would have known that the black-garbed man did not have two good legs. A wintry smile quirked the corners of his mouth—and was gone.

The black-garbed man stopped beside the empty chair at the poker table, his eyes straying for a second to Dave Hall. The puncher gulped—then nodded.

"Jest gettin' ready to deal, Jackson. Set!"

Cal Jackson slid into the chair, twitching his six-guns further forward on his thighs.

His steely gaze held upon Ace Barton, squarely across the table, but he did not speak. After a tense moment, Dave Hall drew a long breath.

"Dang nigh forgot, Cal! Yuh ain't never met Ace Barton!"

JACKSON nodded, but did not offer to shake hands. A flush mounted to Ace Barton's cheeks, and smoldering fires burned brighter in his flashing black eyes.

"Hi'yuh, Jackson!" he grunted.

Cal Jackson laid a handful of coins and a roll of bills on the table. "Honin' for a few hands," he said evenly. "Know Ace Barton's reputation for square dealin'. Don't mind losin' to a good player—but any slick fingered work riles me considerable."

Ace Barton grunted an unintelligible word, and picked up the deck. His long-fingered hands riffled the cards swiftly. He dealt them with a flourish that held more than a little of bravado. Cal Jackson slumped down in his chair, deep-set eyes upon Barton's fingers.

He picked up his five cards. And as he looked at them he began speaking in a low, even voice. He did not glance at the ring of men who had edged close to the table.

"Heard a lot about Ace Barton. There was a story that he was gunned down by a tin-horn, up San Felice way. Some even said he died from the bullets."

Barton laughed shortly. "I played dead, until I had a chance to draw down on thet pilgrim! He's holdin' up six feet of dirt in boot-hill right now!"

Again the mirthless smile flicked across Cal Jackson's face. "I knew Ace Barton wasn't dead. Ace Barton would never die before he got the stranger who gunned him down."

Dave Hall and Buck Roman laid their cards down softly. Their nerves were as tense as tightly-strung wires. They could sense the duel of words between the two men, but could not figure out what it was all about. One thing they did know—the game was due to end before it started.

Across the table, Ace Barton straightened his shoulders. A twisted smile split his face. "The fastest cross-draw artist on the range—thet's me! The stranger who bushwhacked me found thet out!"

Cal Jackson nodded. "That kind of puts a crimp in the story old Brick Hirshell, Sheriff of San Felice County tells."

Dave Hall and Buck Roman caught the

startled twitch on Ace Barton's face, and wondered at it. But Cal Jackson did not change expression.

"Reckon Brick Hirshell is gettin' a little old an' dodderin'," he said softly.

"Brick Hirshell?" Ace Barton's tone was a little too high pitched. "What does thet ol' pelican say?"

"A ramblin' story—but here it is," Jackson said slowly. "Hirshell 'lows that everybody thought Ace Barton was killed by the stranger that Brig Belden hired to gun him. Yuh see, Ace Barton chased Brig Belden out of San Felice for robbin' the Miners' Rest till."

"Yeah! I remember doin' thet!" Barton grunted.

"But accordin' to Hirshell, he lugged Ace Barton to his cabin an' nursed him back to life. Took six-eight months."

"He lied!" Barton rasped. "What else did he say?"

"Thet Brig Belden an' the stranger held up the stage shortly after—thet Belden was killed an' the stranger caught. Sentenced to ten years."

"Wasn't the same hombre!" Barton grated. "I killed thet bushwhacker less than a year after he gunned me!"

"I'm just repeatin' what Hirshell said," Jackson answered softly. "Accordin' to his story, Ace Barton did a lot of thinkin' while he was on his back. After he was up, he drifted out of the country. Seemed to be a little ashamed to be seen in San Felice."

"Ashamed?" Ace Barton's voice was high-pitched. "I drifted, so I could line thet dry-gulcher across my sights!"

"It ain't my story," Jackson said dryly. "Reckon it must be wrong—for Hirshell says Ace Barton never caught sight of that stranger—wouldn't have known him, if he had met him on the trail. But I do recollect Hirshell sayin' that he wouldn't give two cents for the tin-horn's chances, if ever Barton got a line on him."

The last sentence slid between Cal Jackson's teeth in such a flat, toneless whisper that it crinkled the hair on Dave Hall's neck, set Buck Roman's nerves to jumping—and brought a look that was strangely like fear to Ace Barton's black eyes.

"Yuh—yuh mean—"

Cal Jackson pushed his chair back slowly, and heaved himself to his feet. He placed his hands flat on the table and looked squarely into Ace Barton's eyes.

"I mean just this! Ace Barton is ten years older now than when a cowardly tin-horn gunned him down! Likely he's softened an' mellowed a little. Pretty bitter for some time, I reckon, but I suppose that bitterness kind of died out. But the one thing Ace Barton was proud of was his reputation for square dealin'! That meant more to him than anything else in the world!"

"Yeah?" the words slid between Ace Barton's teeth. He pushed his chair back, and rose lithely. His hands rested on the table less than two feet from Cal Jackson's.

"Yeah?" he repeated. "What yuh drivin' at?"

"Reckon Ace Barton would have set quietly, an' watched most anything happen but blackenin' that reputation!" Then the words dragged out with painful slowness. "He might—even have—overlooked losin'—his right leg from the tin-horn's bullet!"

For a breathless second there was dead silence in the saloon. Dave Hall's mouth dropped slackly open. Buck Roman's eyes went wide and saucer-like. The color drained from the gambler's face, and the fear of a cornered rat came into his eyes.

THEN something like a sigh swept over the crowd. At first only one man moved—a little quicker-witted than the rest. He leaped backward from where he stood just behind the startled owner of Ace Barton's. He bumped into another, and rapped out a curse.

Then the crowd parted as if a hand had shoved them, leaving the space behind the gambler clear. Dave Hall and Buck Roman still remained seated, but their hands had dropped to their gun-butts.

Cal Jackson was the only one with steady nerves in the whole room. A wintry smile quirked his lips, but his eyes did not stray from the man who faced him. Then the hombre's lips parted, and the words came hoarsely.

"Yuh're—yuh're——"

"Yeah! I'm Ace Barton! An' yuh're the tin-horn who gunned me, ten years ago! I got your description from Brick Hirshell today!"

"I gunned yuh then—an' I'll——"

The gambler moved with lightning speed. He hurled his body aside, and his hands darted down. And now the wide-eyed crowd were treated to such a dazzling display of gun-speed that it furnished them

talk for many months. Cross-draw against cross-draw—lightning against lightning!

The gambler had the edge. He started the smallest fraction ahead. And even then the peg-legged man seemed to hesitate. The gambler's hand was upon his gun-butt, and beginning to lift before the other's hand went down. Dave Hall caught his breath, for that was giving too much odds.

The gambler's gun was swinging up as the saddle-maker's came from the leather. But both guns barked so closely that they sounded as one. Even Dave Hall's trained ear could not detect the double report. There was a splintering crash—and the peg-legged saddle-maker collapsed to the floor.

The gambler still stood on his feet—but there was a fixed grin on his face—a grin that was almost a grimace. Then he teetered slowly back and forth—back and forth. Now he began to turn, like a top running down. The six-gun dropped from his nerveless hand. His knees finally gave way, and he pitched forward on his face.

For a breathless second no one moved. Then, a bitter curse bubbling from his lips,

Dave Hall leaped toward the man on the floor. He bent down.

"He—got yuh—Ace Barton!"

A soft laugh came from the prone hombre. "Got me, Dave—twice in the same place. Reckon I'll have to carve a new peg. His bullet smashed this one."

Dave Hall laughed shakily, as he lifted Ace Barton to his feet. The man hobbled on one leg to a chair and slumped into it. Then Buck Roman was at his side.

"Yuh're—yuh're shore enough Ace Barton? Yuh ain't——"

The sheriff was at his side now, looking down with added respect. "It was plain self-defense, Barton!" he rasped. "He drew first! Yuh gave him more rope than he was entitled to!"

BARTON nodded slowly. "I aimed to. An' now I'm just Cal Jackson, the saddle-maker again. As far as I'm concerned, Ace Barton, gambler an' cross-draw artist, died ten years ago. We'll let him stay dead—with the reputation of square an' honest dealin'—always!"

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They were a hard breed of men, these outlaw Severns, there was nothing they wouldn't do for a friend . . . and nothing they wouldn't do to an enemy!



"I guess I got to take you three in," Sid said casually.

WHEN A TRIGGER-SLICK DIES

by DICK ROBSON

SID LUNDSTROM, the big Swede sheriff of Broken Bow, didn't rein up his horse until he was inside the circle of firelight, and he kept his hands

well away from his carbine and six-shooter when he dismounted. He stood by the horse a moment looking at the three men around the fire while they returned his scrutiny.

They were three bad ones all right, each dangerous in his own separate way. Sid Lundstrom left his horse ground-hitched and moved toward the fire, the frozen grass crunching beneath his boots. He probably couldn't have slipped up on that little crowd unseen if he had wanted to.

Jess Overhold leaned back against a boulder. He was a big, gray-faced man with a cynical droop to the corners of his mouth and pale blue eyes that never missed a movement near him. Overhold was a killer, cold-blooded, killing when there was profit in it.

A breed the Broken Bow country knew as Banner squatted on his haunches next to Overhold. He had been holding a skillet of bacon over the fire until Sid rode up. He set the skillet down carefully and let his hands drop back to his sides without moving the rest of his body.

Cal Severn was across the fire from Overhold and Banner. He was the youngest of the crowd, not much more than a kid, with yellowish hair sticking through his hat and a thin, wolfish look on his face. Sid Lundstrom knew the Severn breed. They were bad, all right. It was bred into them, but they were loyal to their friends, too.

The sheriff nodded to the three men and held his big, freckled hands out to the heat of the fire. A November wind whistled through the foothills around them.

"Evenin', gents," Sid said. "Don't see any bank loot layin' around."

"Didn't expect to, did you?" Overhold laughed brittly. "We didn't crack that bank down in town. It was three other guys. We're just out chasin' 'em same as you are."

SID LUNDSTROM took off his hat and ran a hand through his graying hair. Then he reached for the makings and built a smoke, all very deliberately. "You was identified," he admitted. "Several people recognized you."

"And ain't that tough?" Overhold laughed again. Banner, the breed, shifted his body a little with the quick, cat-like way he had of moving so that the butt of the gun on his right hip was within reach.

Sid waited until he had lighted his smoke from a twig out of the fire, adjusted the coffee pot so that it wouldn't boil over, and leaned back comfortably.

"There's them that'd loot a bank because they wanted the money," he said slowly, "and there's them that'd do it for hellishness, and there's another kind of fellow

that'd maybe hold up a bank and commit murder, too, in order to settle a grudge."

"Well?" Overhold demanded.

Sid blew smoke out of his wide nostrils. He knew what he meant, all right, that all three kinds were there around the fire. Overhold was money crazy, like Sam Hailey who owned the bank, and like Alec Polger who had been killed in the robbery. The breed had just gone along because hellishness was part of his nature. Cal Severn had a grudge against Hailey and Polger.

That was the way it was, even though the Swede couldn't figure out how to go about saying it or what good saying it would do.

He looked down at his cigarette, then up at Cal Severn. "You shot Polger, didn't you, Cal?" he asked.

"You're damn right I did," Cal snapped. "And I'll get Hailey. Sid, you figure on takin' us all in and hangin' us. Well, I'll get Hailey if I have to come back from hell to do it."

"Sam Hailey killed my brother. Hell, I know he said Tom was rustlin' and maybe he was, but Hailey drove him to it. He killed Pa and he killed my mother, too, even if they did both die natural after they lost the place over on Divide. I'm goin' to get Hailey, Sid."

"Shut up." Overhold's voice cracked like a whip.

Sid Lundstrom wiped his red face on his red bandanna. "Cal, the law says I got to stop you from gettin' Hailey."

He pulled back the coffee pot and set it on a rock. Trouble was going to come and come fast, and there was no need of spilling the coffee when it came. Whatever men were left might need that coffee pretty badly. He took another long drag of his cigarette and flipped it into the fire.

"I guess I got to take all three of you in," he said as casually as though he were talking to the circuit rider at the town prayer meeting.

Sid stood up. So did the other three. He had been careful to stay on the same side of the fire as Cal Severn, and he noticed Cal stepped a little behind him.

Maybe Cal would shoot him from behind, maybe not. The Severns were bad. They were cattle thieves and horse thieves, and Cal was a killer, but they didn't turn against their friends.

Funny thing, Sid reflected in that instant while they all stood there around the fire with the coffee pot looking on from the rock

where he had set it, the Severns didn't seem made like most men in some respects. They weren't afraid of dying. Cal meant what he said when he said he'd come back from hell if necessary to get Sam Hailey. They were a hard breed, hard as they ever came, and if they started a job they finished it.

"Sheriff, you're either a damn poor bluffer or a damn fool," Overhold's lips twitched in a sneer. "Shuck off that gun."

Sid stared straight into Overhold's pale eyes and Overhold returned the stare. Behind him, Sid could hear Cal Severn breathing heavily. Banner began to ease back, an inch at a time, and let his hand move toward his gun grip.

"I'm takin' you in, Jess, either ridin' in your saddle or tied across it," Sid spoke carefully.

Overhold yawned and stretched his long, bony arms. His arms were chest-high before they slapped down again and his hands hit the butts of his guns, spinning them out of the holsters and jabbing them up all in the same perfectly timed gesture.

"You asked for it," he snapped.

Sid saw the breed's gun coming out, too, a trifle slower than Overhold's. He grabbed at his own gun and lunged to one side, ducking and crouching in toward the fire.

Orange flame lanced out of the gun muzzle in Overhold's right hand, and the bullet took a neat little slice out of the Swede's hat. Overhold's next shot went into the fire, and Jess Overhold was reeling back.

THE Swede's gun was talking, but talking at the half breed who seemed to get his body all tangled up and go plunging down. Behind him, Sid could hear Cal firing methodically, not wasting any powder and planting each bullet where it would count. Necessity and living in the rimrock had taught the Severns saving ways.

Overhold's voice came in a gasp. "I figured the play different, sheriff."

Sid turned on Cal and let the gun drop into his holster. "Put up that iron," he ordered. "I'm takin' you in."

Cal Severn's face looked thinner and more wolfish than ever while he crouched there just inside the firelight, his gun leveled on the big sheriff's chest.

"Don't try it, Sid," he said almost pleadingly. "For God sake don't try it."

"I'm takin' you in," Sid repeated.

He moved toward Cal slowly, his hands empty, staring straight into the muzzle of the gun. It was a gamble then. With a

gun he wouldn't stand a chance with Cal Severn, but without a gun—well, that was a gamble.

It wouldn't be fear of dying that would make Cal shoot. The Severns weren't like most men in that respect. It would simply be so that he could stay alive to settle his score with Sam Hailey.

"Sid," Cal pleaded. "You don't sabe. I got to get Hailey. Us Severns was just made so we can't turn back. I'll take what's comin' to me. I ain't scared of that, but dammit, Sid—"

Sid didn't answer. He stepped close to Cal, reached out one big hand and seized the gun. He tilted it up, then jerked it out of Cal's hand. Cal's face was white and his lips twitching a little.

"Why in hell did I let you do that, Sid?" he whispered.

"'Spect it's 'cause you're a Severn," Sid told him. "'Spect it's because I saw that your mother got her grocery bill paid after your Pa died even when she didn't have any money. Yeh, there ain't a thing you Severns wouldn't do for a man you liked and there ain't a thing you wouldn't do to one you hated."

Cal laughed thinly, reached for the coffee pot and a tin cup and gulped down a cupful of scalding coffee. "If I go in with you—" He ran one finger around his throat. "That right?"

"Afraid so," Sid Lundstrom admitted. "I'll see you get a square trial, Cal, but a jury'll say it's murder. We better get started. The coroner can pick up them other two in the morning."

Sid Lundstrom untied his sheepskin coat from behind his saddle and pulled it on before he swung onto his horse. He rubbed his big hands together to get some circulation into them again and watched Cal mount.

He didn't handcuff or tie his prisoner, and he didn't even bother to keep a gun on Cal. He knew the Severns pretty well. There was a lot of twisted pride in that outlaw family, and there was no use making things harder on Cal by insulting him with handcuffs.

"Sid," Cal seemed to be talking as much to himself as to the sheriff as they jogged across the brown Montana hills. "Sid, if I don't get Hailey he'll go on just like he's doin'. There'll be other folks he'll put on the back trail. Can't you see that, Sid?"

"Us Severns wasn't no worse than most folks. Maybe Pa had run a crooked brand

or two, but most folks has. When me and Tom was born, Pa figured us both for preachers. It was Hailey made him turn bad when he crowded Pa off Divide Creek. Seein' what me and Tom would turn into killed the old folks. And there'll be others go just the same way."

"Can't do it, Cal." Sid looked up from making himself a smoke, sheltering his hands beneath his sheepskin to keep the wind from blowing the tobacco out of the paper. "I got a job to do, too, one I promised other folks to see got done."

Cal turned in his saddle. His mouth had stopped twitching, and there was a cold, brilliant light in his gray eyes, like fire flickering behind ice.

"I'll kill Sam Hailey if I have to come back from hell to do it."

Sid had to strike three matches to get his smoke going. If any other man had said that, it would have been simply an empty threat or a boast, but the Severn men didn't boast. If they made a threat, it was a promise, and they kept their word.

Off across the flats, the lights of Broken Bow twinkled yellowly through the darkness. Cal reined up his horse when they came in sight of the first lights. He gulped a couple of times but that was the only sign he gave that he knew what returning to town meant for him.

He turned in his saddle and looked off toward the west where a long bare spine marked Divide Creek.

"See that hump up on Divide." He pointed for Sid to look. "That's where the old folks is buried, and Tom's pretty close to there. Hailey put 'em all there. Reckon this is about the last time I'll ever see that there old hump. Just wanted to be sure and remember it."

SID nodded and brought a pair of handcuffs out of his pocket. "Reckon I'd better put 'em on here, Cal. It'd maybe cost me my job if we was to go down with you ridin' open." Cal held out his hands and grinned. They understood each other.

Sid Lundstrom noticed there was quite a little crowd, a dozen or so men, around the sheriff's office and jail when he rode into town with his prisoner. He didn't like that, but Ben Peck, his deputy, was there and seemed to have everything pretty well in hand.

There was a low murmur from the crowd when Sid crowded Cal Severn's horse in to the hitching rack and they both dismounted.

Sid let his eyes sweep over the men. Sam Hailey was there, standing a little apart from the others, and most of the others were men from Hailey's ranches. He didn't like the looks of it, but there didn't seem much he could do about it. In Montana, men had a perfect right to stand where they pleased.

The crowd split to let him and Cal through. Sid had reached the door of the office before Hailey's voice stopped him. "Where's the other two that was in on this?"

Sid thought a minute. "They didn't feel like comin' in."

Hailey pushed toward him. He was a big man, about Sid's age, with a habit of keeping his fists clenched most of the time, and talking in a big, booming voice.

"You've been friendly with Cal Severn, there, Sheriff, and I want to tell you there's going to be no favoritism showed to him on account of that."

Sid looked Hailey over, couldn't think of anything that was worth saying and pushed the door open. Hailey was talking for the benefit of the crowd, and so long as it didn't go any farther than talk, Sid was satisfied. Hailey followed him into the office. Sid didn't like that, either.

There was pure hatred in Hailey's voice when he stepped close to Cal and snarled, "Severn, I put your brother where he won't do any more harm, and I'm going to put you there, too."

"Let him alone," Sid ordered.

Hailey's face started to turn dark, as it always did when he was crossed. "Are you trying to tell me what to do, Sheriff?"

"Might be." Sid pushed Cal toward a little room at the rear of the building where the windows were barred and there was a padlock on the door. It wasn't much of a jail, having been the commissary when Broken Bow was an army post, but it served.

Hailey was waiting, sitting on Sid's desk when the sheriff returned. "There's another thing, too, Lundstrom," Hailey snapped. "I want the money those three got away with. You understand that."

Sid nodded. "Pull yourself up a chair, Sam. I want to do a little talkin' myself."

Sid pulled off his sheepskin, hung it on a nail, added his vest, and very carefully built a smoke. "Sam," he said, "Cal and them other two killed Polger and cracked the bank, but you was the man that planned it."

"Do you mean—" Hailey roared.

"Huh-uh, not that way, Sam. The law

can't touch you. You and Polger had quite a spread built up, and if one of you died, the other'n would get it. You knew Cal would kill either of you if he got a chance, so you sort of gave him the chance, to get Alec. Sam, there ain't a thing, not a damn thing, you wouldn't do for money."

Sid stared down at his cigarette. That was a long speech for him, and he was a little surprised at himself for talking that much. Usually he couldn't have thought of that many words to string together at one time.

Hailey's face was brick red with anger. "Lundstrom," he snapped, "I'm getting damn well fed up with you as sheriff. You forget that kind of talk and get that money back or Ben Pack is going to be wearing your star."

Hailey slammed the office door when he went out. Sid looked after him a moment speculatively and shook his head. He got up heavily and went back to the padlocked cell. There wasn't any way the law could touch Sam Hailey.

"Guess you heard what went on out there," he said awkwardly to Cal Severn. "Want to say where you cached that money. I dunno. Maybe if we got that back, I could see you just got sent up to Deer Lodge."

CAL laughed harshly. "I ain't scared of hangin' if that's what you mean, Sid. If I went to Deer Lodge, I wouldn't never get back to finish things up here."

Sid locked the door again, pocketed the key, and wandered down to the railroad house for a belated supper. He noticed quite a few people on the street didn't speak to him and that Sam Hailey had more of his own men in town than usual.

When the waitress brought him his meal, he stopped her by spinning a silver dollar on the counter. "What's the talk in town?" he asked.

She considered a moment before she picked up the dollar. "Hailey says you intend to turn Severn loose and let the money go. Folks that lost money in that holdup are pretty upset."

"Don't blame 'em," Sid felt awkward gossiping with a pretty girl. "Sometime Hailey's goin' to open that mouth of his'n so far he'll fall plumb into it."

Sid was worried when he left the eating house. He didn't like the way men kept watching him and stopped talking when he approached. He liked it still less when he

saw Ben Pack drinking with Hailey in the Free Silver Bar.

He bought a pint of good whiskey and took it back to the jail to Cal. Cal knocked the neck off the bottle, gulped down half a pint of whiskey and strode to the window where he could look out onto the street. His eyes were pale and flickering when he turned back to Sid.

"You played square with me. I'll play square with you. Remember that trail that goes up Shoshone Butte right alongside the old freight road, the one you can see the whole road from? Well, if you was to follow that till you hit a little cave back in the rock you might find the bank money there."

Sid looked out of the window. He could see men milling around on the sidewalks from there, and he knew that Cal must know what they meant. He wondered if Cal was deliberately trying to keep him out of trouble with Hailey. Sid Lundstrom had never been very good at figuring puzzles, and that one had him stumped.

He might send Pack out to look in the cave, but that would only make Bailey's men more dangerous because it would look as though he were trying to get Pack out of town so he could have a free hand.

He decided the deputy had better stay. Ben Pack was a good enough man, maybe not quite as steady as he might be, but honest enough. If a mob tried to take over the jail, Pack would prevent it if any man could.

Sid pulled on his coat and went down to the livery stable after his horse. He wished that old trail up Shoshone Butte wasn't so far from town.

He was beginning to feel old and disgusted with himself. Times like that, when the law said one thing and a man's own nature said another, were hard to handle. Still, he had sworn to uphold the law, and as he looked at matters in his not very articulate way, there wasn't anything else he could do but what he was doing.

Cal Severn paced his cell like a trapped coyote walking only as far as the trap chain would let him. He looked out of the window, took another gulp of whiskey and returned to his bunk.

He fished around in his pockets until he found a spare .45 cartridge and a piece of paper. Using the lead of the cartridge, he scribbled a note and wrapped it around the cartridge. Then he waited, holding the note

and cartridge in one hand and the whiskey bottle in the other.

He laughed softly to himself and smashed his fist against the window. The wind blowing in through the shattered window was cold, but despite that there was sweat on Cal Severn's thin, gray tinged face. "Damn you, Hailey," he kept muttering to himself. "Damn you."

The sheriff had been gone for an hour when Cal heard footsteps in the office outside the cell. He heard Ben Pack say uncertainly, "Listen Sam, the sheriff is goin' to raise hell if he finds out I let you in here."

"If Lundstrom can't find out where that money is, I can," Hailey shouted. "And by God, I'm going to."

Cal glanced through the open window and shivered a little. He tossed the cartridge with the note wrapped around it in the center of the floor and sprawled out on the bunk, the whiskey bottle almost empty beside him on the floor. The key grated in the padlock.

Hailey strode into the room, walking very stiffly erect. "Where did that liquor come from?" he demanded and kicked the bottle over. He was reaching for Cal Severn's shoulder when Pack stopped him.

"There's something that looks maybe like a note on the floor there, Sam."

HAILEY picked up the note and strode over to the window where there was light enough to read it. He swore angrily under his breath. Then a shrewd, cold light came into his eyes.

"The stuff's cached under a heap of rocks out on the old freight road," the note read. It was signed "Jesse Overhold." Hailey's blunt fingers trembled while he stared from the note to Ben Pack the deputy.

There was six thousand dollars out on the freight road for a man to pick up. Six thousand dollars was a lot of money, and if it never returned to the bank there was a legitimate excuse for its not returning.

"What's it say?" Pack demanded.

Hailey's mouth tightened. "Lundstrom was lying when he said he got those other two. This is from Overhold. He says they'll get Severn out of here tonight. Heaven only knows how many men they've got. Damn lucky Severn was too drunk to see this."

Pack fidgeted uneasily. "If they've got men enough, it's goin' to be darned hard to hold this place."

"We won't have to hold it." Hailey crumpled the note in his hand and shoved it into his pocket. "I'm going to talk to some of my boys. Severn won't be around then, and if Sid Lundstrom says anything, you just remember this note. I'm getting damn sick of Lundstrom, anyhow."

As soon as the door closed, Cal Severn stood up. His hands were trembling when he built a smoke, but he was grinning in that tight-lipped, wolfish way he had. He gulped smoke into his lungs and listened to the angry shouts coming from outside.

He had finished with the smoke when he heard the door of the sheriff's office flung open and men crowding inside. He flipped away the cigarette butt, took another long look out at the white sage flats with the moon sailing over them, and waited.

Dawn was breaking across the gray lava hummocks when Sid Lundstrom came in sight of Broken Bow sprawled out on the flats. He was tired and disgusted with himself and puzzled.

There had been no bank loot cached up on the old cattle trail, nor had there been any sign a horse had been ridden up that trail for weeks. He couldn't quite figure why Cal Severn would want to send him on a wild goose chase.

The town was quiet when he rode in just as the sun was coming up through the purple dust haze. Sid nodded agreeably and let his big body slump down in the saddle. There was no danger of a lynch mob as quiet as the town was. Mobs didn't spring from nowhere. They had to be built up.

He reined up in front of his office and dismounted. Ben Pack stood in the doorway watching him. Sid nodded to the deputy and let a grin slide over his big, rugged face.

"You fed the prisoner yet, Ben?"

Pack shifted uncertainly in the doorway, reached for tobacco and changed his mind. He stood there staring down at his hands.

"Severn's gone. Some of the boys—well, they lynched him last night."

Sid didn't say anything. He just stood there looking at his deputy and fumbling at the buttons on his coat. Pack's voice was shaky when he went on to tell Sid about the note.

"Overhold's dead." Sid Lundstrom's eyes got bleak and wintry looking. "I want to see that note. Hailey still got it?"

Pack nodded. "I dunno where he went, but he rode in just ahead of you. He's still

down at the livery barn. Want me to come along?"

Sid thought a minute. "No," he decided. He shook his gun loose in his holster before he started down the street to the livery stable. What was coming was strictly between him and Sam Hailey and Cal.

Hailey was coming out of the livery stable carrying two saddlebags when Sid stopped him. Hailey set the saddle bags down and stepped in front of them. "What do you want?" he demanded.

Sid looked into Hailey's glittering eyes, and he noticed, too, how the banker kept wetting his lips with his tongue. "I want to see what's in them paniers."

"You can go to hell," Lundstrom."

Sid considered a moment. He had never been particularly good at talking, and the more angry he got the harder it was for him to talk. He was getting angrier and colder inside every minute.

"You picked up a note last night," he fumbled at his words a little. "And you caused a man to be lynched. If that note said what you say it did, you had good enough reasons. Only I know it didn't because Jess Overhold was dead then."

"Well?"

"Hailey, causin' a man to be lynched is murder, and if that note didn't say there was goin' to be a jail delivery, I'll see you hang just as sure as heaven."

SAM HAILEY'S voice was thin, with a dangerous knife edge on it. "I threw the note away. What's these saddle bags got to do with it?"

"I seen you out on the old freight road last night," Sid kept moving toward Hailey and the bags. "I think maybe the loot from the bank is in them paniers. I figured you were in on this, Sam, one way or another, and if you were in so deep you knew where that loot was—well, that's bank robbery and murder. I'm goin' to look in them bags."

Sid Lundstrom reached for one of the saddle bags. Talking was a pretty hard thing for him to do, and he was glad he had that end of it over with. Hailey either had the money or he hadn't. If he hadn't, well and good. If he had— That would suit Sid all right, too.

Sam Hailey was thinking fast while he watched Sid fumble at the straps on the saddle bag. The note he had picked up was in his pocket, and it would clear him of the bank robbery, but if he showed it,

he knew the big, slow-moving sheriff would use that note just as he said he would. But if he didn't show it, the money in the two saddle bags would convict him of bringing about the robbery of his own bank and the murder of his partner.

He knew how Montana juries would look upon that.

The sheriff's back was turned, and he was stooping down. Sid Lundstrom had always been too trusting for his own good, Hailey reflected coldly. There was no one in sight. If something were to happen to Lundstrom, people might suspect him, Sam Hailey. But with a man of his importance, suspicion wasn't proof by a long way.

He slowly eased the gun out of his shoulder holster and brought it up level with the back of the sheriff's head. His thumb began to ease back the hammer.

Sid Lundstrom straightened with an awkward jerk. There was the crack of a gun. Sid Lundstrom looked a little surprised at the smoke spiraling from his own gun muzzle and at Sam Hailey tottering in front of him.

"Guess it's a good thing I figured you that way, Sam," he said thoughtfully, "and was waitin' for the click of the gun hammer."

Ben Pack cornered Sid in the sheriff's office and buttonholed him. "Now listen, Sid," he demanded. "There was only three of 'em in the holdup, and if Hailey was in on it, then Cal Severn wasn't. Cal was innocent, is that it?"

"Maybe," Sid admitted, "dependin' on how broadminded you are and how well you know a man and his reasons."

Pack shook his head. "I don't sabe at all, but anyhow, the boys want to put up a monument to Cal, and they figure that since you knowed him better'n anybody else you'd maybe know what to put on it."

SID built a smoke very deliberately. He knew what should go on the monument all right. Something about how the Severns weren't like most men because they weren't afraid of dying if they could get a job done that way. And how there wasn't a thing they wouldn't do for a man they liked or to a man they hated. He wasn't much of a hand at stringing words together, though.

"Shucks, just say most anything nice," he growled. "I reckon Cal would understand. I reckon he's satisfied."

Those two bullet-welded saddle-pards knew that Gun-boss Flanner and his renegades were treacherous and deadly as cornered wolves . . . and that no matter which way they turned, their ranch would be his . . . and their lives, the Reaper's!



*Jeff clawed for the saddle . . . knew
a sickening instant when he was flying
through space.*

TWO AGAINST THE TRAIL- WOLVES

by C. WILLIAM HARRISON

FOR weeks the storm clouds of their quarrel had been brewing. It was coming rapidly to a head now, dark thunderheads of temper that were piling up behind strained, bitter words into something that loomed ugly and inevitable.

Old Jeff Lasher shook himself stiffly from the porch rail he had been leaning on. Tall, gaunt, his broad shoulders slightly bent, he planted his feet wide and glared defiantly at the cowman in front of him. His grizzled, leathery face was flushed darkly, and anger smoldered in his pale gray eyes. Fury he had fought to hold in leash shook the harsh words that burst from his taut lips.

"You're nothing but a stubborn, cantankerous old fool, Link," he snapped hotly. "We been pards for thirty years, but I've had about enough of your bull-headedness. You an' me put up all the money we had to buy this spread. Curt Flanner was just playin' us for a couple shorthorns. He figured we couldn't make a go of it, with all the trouble he's throwed in our laps. He wanted us to go broke so's he could foreclose on the mortgage an' be ahead the two thousand we gave him. We still got a chance of lickin' him, an' I'm danged if I'll set still an' see you throw it to hell. I panned out that gold pocket I found in Squaw Creek, an' I'm takin' it to the bank my way!"

He rocked there on his wide-spread feet, staring grimly at the dark tide of anger that rose in Link Borden's square-jawed face. Knotted muscles rode the blunt line of Link's jaw, leaving a faint trail of gray across his leathery skin. His deep blue eyes flashed sparks of anger, and his square-fingered hands clenched and unclenched at his side.

"If that's what you're set on, then it's your own funeral," Link flared harshly. "I'm takin' that herd across Spur Mesa, an' you can't argue me out of it. It's the only way I can get them to town b'fore that note comes due tomorrow. Sellin' that herd will make half of that note, an' . . ."

"That herd'll go over the cliff," Jeff Lasher cut in. "Flanner'll stampede 'em. You'd know that if you had hoss sense. He showed he was after us when he let a bunch of his steers get tangled up in our herd when they was bunched to drive."

WHITE-LIPPED, old Link Borden stared up at his partner. "I cut his cattle out, an' you drove 'em back to Flan-

ner's range this evening," he snapped. "Them fifty steers will pay my half of that note. If I lose 'em, it's my share of the ranch I'm losin'. If you stick to your damn fool plan of takin' that gold dust through Skull Canyon, it's your bad luck. Snap Boyle and his gang will be layin' there for you. If they get that gold you don't need to come back here an'—" His voice choked off, as if trying to take back those hot, bitter words. But it was too late.

Harsh, strained silence rolled in, enveloped the two old cowmen, the porch of the little ranch house. Jeff Lasher's face grayed as if he had suddenly received a stinging blow. He seemed to flinch inside, then stiffened, a crooked little smile coming to his taut lips.

"After thirty years—" he muttered softly. "All right, Link. It's your say." His jaw ridged with the bunching of lean, hard muscles. "But I'm takin' the gold through Skull Canyon."

Woodenly, he turned away. He didn't seem to see the hesitant hand Link put out, hear Link's fumbling words:

"Jeff, I didn't mean that—"

He stalked stiffly into the house, reached for his gun hanging from its peg in the wall, buckled it on. Strangely, he didn't feel that hot, driving rage now that had prodded him a while ago. He was cold and calm inside, almost numb, he thought, and a little shaky. The little poke of gold dust he had panned from the pocket he had discovered in Squaw Creek lay on the table where Link had put it after taking it from the safe. He picked it up, hefted it moodily, and shoved it into his pocket. His share of the ranch, Link had said, and if he lost it that was all. And after thirty years—

He went outside, led his bay mare from the corral, saddled it. He climbed stiffly into the saddle, started to swing his horse out toward the canyon trail, changed his mind, and hipped around facing the house. Link was coming down the steps toward him, weaving slightly as if age had suddenly made his legs unsteady, dimmed his eyes.

"Jeff—" he began hoarsely.

"About them cattle," Jeff cut in gruffly. "You'll find 'em down on Salt Flat. It'll be dark when you start your drive, but you won't have any trouble finding them. Them steers of Flanner's—I drove Flanner's cattle back to his own land."

Something lumped in his throat then, choked up his words. He turned away, conscious of Link's bitter eyes following him, as he kicked his horse into a lope toward the canyon trail.

JEFF'S eyes were moody and hard as his mare jogged through the thickening darkness toward the head of the canyon. It was high country where he and old Link had started their Turkey Track spread a little more than a year ago, range that was dotted with sage and pinon and well mantled with grama grass. The last glow of twilight was fading from the sky above the Cebolletas; down in Skull Canyon the murk of night had already claimed the frowning gray walls, the rock-tortured trail that made the only short-cut to Clark City.

Jeff's drawn lips moved to utter grim, bitter words. "The hot-headed old coot! Link'll lose every head of stock we got tryin' to get them to town by tomorrow. If he'd stopped wranglin' about me bein' robbed of this gold an' listened to reason—He'll see I was talkin' hoss sense when he has them cattle stampeded over the cliff."

A thought struck him, crinkled his forehead with a frown of worry. What if old Link went over the wall trying to head off the herd after Curt Flanner's night riders stampeded them. And Flanner's men would be there waiting for Link to bring the cattle through. He knew that with a cold gnawing in the pit of his stomach. Twice today he had seen a rider moving furtively through the pinon, watching while he and Link finished cutting out the Circle F cattle that had been mixed in with their herd. Flanner was waiting, and he wouldn't let Link get to town with cattle that would pay half of the note Flanner held on the Turkey Track. But Link had argued that taking the herd over the Mesa trail was their only hope of meeting the note that fell due tomorrow.

"Flanner'll have to wait a day for the rest of his money if I pay him half of what we owe him with the gold I got," Jeff had insisted stubbornly. "Snap Boyle is workin' with Flanner. I'd bet on that. An' he shore won't be expectin' me to pack a thousand in gold right through his back yard. I'll get through, an' I'll bring the sheriff back to be sure we get the cattle through if you'll hold up the drive a day."

And so they had come to the impasse,

with Link obstinate in his decision to drive the cattle after dark over the Mesa trail, and Jeff equally inflexible in his plan of taking the gold through Snap Boyle's outlaw stronghold.

Jeff's pale gray eyes clouded bitterly, as he thought of the explosion that had followed the locking of their tempers. Both he and Link had worked too hard during the past months, fighting, planning, scheming against Curt Flanner's underhanded attempts to force them to go broke. Burned range, rustled cattle, poisoned water; it had all gone to strain their nerves to the snapping point, making them raw and jumpy and edgy inside.

And it had ended in one violent outburst of words they would regret the rest of their lives. Thirty years of back-breaking work shattered in one inflamed instant. And still he rode on, heading into the outlaw-infested depths of Skull Canyon trying to save the ranch he and Link had skimped and saved for half a lifetime to buy.

THE trail dipped abruptly into the forbidding black maw of the canyon, twisting and turning its way down the wall. A chill breeze reached up from the inky depths as if trying to suck both horse and rider into the yawning pit of the canyon.

Jeff's jaw tightened, and he pulled the collar of his jumper closer around his neck. His horse fidgeted nervously, but he forced it grimly over the lip of the trail.

Down below he lost all sense of time or distance. Tense moments dragged by, grating on thin-edged nerves. Only dimly he could make out the trail his horse minced down. He gave the mare its head, trusting it to escape the loose rocks that rolled underfoot, threatening at every instant to plunge them both to the bottom of the wall in a roaring, grinding landslide of boulders and stones. A rising current of misty, dank air brushed his leathery cheek, brought the rumble of Skull Creek churning and heaving its way through the rocks and boulders that tortured the floor of the canyon.

Minutes later the pitch of the trail sloped off, threading through a tangled maze of boulders that loomed shadowy and indistinct in the darkness. A few stunted pines stretched claw-like fingers up toward the black of the sky. No more than a dozen or so yards away the creek chattered and

fussed as it plunged along its rock-tangled way through the canyon.

Suddenly Jeff Lasher felt cold; not from the quickening night breeze, or the cold, damp mist that rose from the cascading waters of the creek. It was a cold that struck inside him, bringing the gnawing fear that maybe Link had been right. Jaw muscles bunched and rolled under his leathery skin. He would get through to Clark City. He had to. It was more than pride; a deeper, more tangible reason that prodded him on. He hitched his Colt around to the front of his leg, making sure that its jutting handle was clear of his jumper. He rubbed his hands and arms to thaw out the damp chill that was cramping his muscles.

It was a half mile farther on that he came to Snap Boyle's hideout. A faint glimmer of lamp light slanted from a crack in a burlap-covered window. A single low-built sprawling cabin showed dimly through the boulders, its rock-slabbed walls catching the faint light of the moon rising over the rim of the canyon.

He eased his mare to a halt, bent forward in the saddle rubbing its neck gently. No sound came to his straining ears, yet a vague, impalpable fear gripped him. He tried to shake the feeling off, tell himself that Snap Boyle's outlaws would be up on the Mesa waiting for Link to bring the herd through like he had told Link, but the intangible sense of danger persisted.

He locked his jaws, nudged his mount into a slow walk. He came abreast of the cabin, then he was past it. A fierce, burning exultation hammered through his veins.

"I'll make it," he growled under his breath. "Right through Boyle's back yard. Like I told Link, they won't be expectin' me to come this way, an' . . ."

"Reach, feller!"

The harsh, grating words lashed out from behind a jumble of rocks up ahead. Unconsciously, Jeff pulled his horse to a halt. Dimly visible figures moved like shadows through the boulders on either side of the trail. One, two, three of them, he counted, with dull-blue light glinting from the muzzles of bared guns.

One of the men was coming forward cautiously. As if from a distance, Jeff heard the outlaw's voice hollowly through the shattered hopes that tumbled down over his brain. Link had been right; they had been waiting for him, for the gold he was packing.

"That's right," the outlaw mocked harshly. "Just set tight, an' you'll stay in one piece. Thought you'd cut a rusty, didn't you? But we'd 'a' got you no matter which way you went. There's men waitin' up on the Mesa, an' others on the long trail around the Mesa. We'll take your gold like we'll stampede your cattle over the cliff, an' . . ."

Suddenly, Jeff's gun was in his hand, jumping and roaring. The outlaw's words choked off as hot lead hammered into his body. A single shrill scream of mortal agony sliced through the night air. A heavy body thudded dully on the ground. A riderless horse pitched wildly, then rattled off through the rocks.

JEFF heard his own voice cursing and yelling above the throbbing roar of his guns. Jabbing fingers of Colt-fire stabbed through the darkness toward him. Lead whipped past his face, screamed from the rocks on either side of him. Time hung suspended in that bullet-shattered instant. All was flaming, rocketing, pulsating death.

Then an invisible blow hammered into his chest. The impact of the slug almost lifted him clear of the saddle. He clawed for the horn, knew a fleeting, sickening instant when he was off balance, flying through space. A hoarse yell of triumph rang out from the rocks ahead.

"Got him! He took my lead, damn him!"

Sharp-edged stones were knifing into his back. He tried stubbornly to push into a sitting position, lift his gun, but there was no more strength left in his battered old body. Someone was bending over him, a blurry, bearded face, thick, sneering lips, red-rimmed eyes. He felt the poke of gold snatched from under his belt, then saw the yawning muzzle of a gun tilt down almost in his face.

"You killed Jim, damn yuh!" a thin, grating voice snarled. "My pard! I'll blow you to hell so fast you'll . . ."

A hand reached out from the darkness, pulled the gun away.

"He's cashin' in, Cal," another voice cut in. "Let him lay here an' think it over while he dies. Let him burn an' rot inside, while we're up on the Mesa helpin' drive his cattle over the cliff."

Then he was alone. Hoof beats clattered over the rock-studded trail, faded into nothing as the silence rolled in. Minutes

dragged by like hours. Jeff didn't lose unconsciousness. He lay there staring dully up at the stars that were beginning to speckle the night sky, chest burning and aching where the slug had plowed through flesh and bone. His skin felt warm and damp and sticky. A million needles of pain were stabbing through him where the stones gouged into his back.

Bitter, galling thoughts tumbled through his mind. It wasn't the fear of dying. Hell, a gent has to die sometime, he told himself, and he was old, weighted with long years of hard, back-breaking work. He had blotted his chances—his half of the Turkey Track, Link had called it—but there might still be a chance of helping Link. He had to do something. There was a reason.

Color drained from his leathery face, as he fought his way to a sitting position, and then shoved weakly to his feet. The movement turned loose throbbing trip-hammers of agony where the slug had bored into his chest. He fumbled his shirt open, and padded his handkerchief over the wound. It was high up in his shoulder and bleeding freely. He couldn't tell whether the bullet had gone completely through him or not.

He didn't know how he got onto his horse, or made that torturous climb back up the canyon wall. But somehow he made it, swaying drunkenly in the saddle, enduring the molten fire that ran through his veins, seeped through the already soaked handkerchief. Sage and pinon, drenched by pale light flooding down from the moon climbing high in the sky, spun crazily before his eyes. Every muscle in his gaunt old body ached and pulsed with pain. His throat flamed raw with every gasping breath he drew into his lungs.

Somewhere across the range he heard the blatant echoes of gun-fire, split by the faint, hollow drum of hoofs and the yells of men. He gauged his direction stubbornly, gathered the last of his fagging strength to hold himself in the saddle, and kicked his horse into a run.

The barrage of shots ended as abruptly as it had started. The rumble of horses' hoofs and the yelling of the night riders receded into the distance as he pounded up to the rim of the cliff.

An ugly, stagnant silence rolled in, broken only by the faint sough of the wind through the trees, the bawling of a dying steer that floated up from the foot of the cliff. A numbing sense of hopelessness claimed him, as he stared at a hat—Link's battered felt hat—at the edge of the cliff.

"Link," he choked brokenly. "Link—"

He seemed to collapse inside, sway in the saddle, then slide off into space. Then someone was there beside him. Strong hands reached out, caught him, eased him to the ground. He stared upward at the man's square, bloody face, dully realizing that he was looking at Link. And he heard Link's voice.

"It's me, Jeff! They hit me like you said they would. I was a damned fool. One of 'em said you was dead, an' I went crazy. They killed my hoss, nicked me—but, hell, Jeff, I didn't mean what I said back there. We're still pards. But I lost our cattle . . ."

"Flanner's cattle," Jeff heard himself saying hoarsely. "I knowed you was set on that drive, Link. I lied to you. I run our herd back in Pine Gulch. I figured you wouldn't check brands after dark. Flanner drove his own cattle over the cliff. But that gold I was carryin'—Snap Boyle's gang got it, an' . . ."

HIS voice trailed off, puzzled. Link was smiling. And Link was saying something.

"You cantankerous old coot!" came Link's words. "All they got was half a lead pipe I filed up to fill your poke with. Switched the gold on you. Didn't see no sense of losin' it b'cause you was so danged bull-headed . . ." He broke off as if the word was suddenly galling to his lips.

But Jeff Lasher was smiling. He thought it was funny as hell.



*He whirled and drilled young
Burt square through the heart.*



“I HAVE EYES TO KILL WITH!”

by **VERNON JAMES**

The bullet that had creased Sheriff Buck Burton's head had stolen his sight—and had turned his bailiwick into Rap Gruber's own Colt-rodged range!

SHERIFF BUCK BURTON'S thick fingers groped blindly toward the chair beside the bunk. He was conscious of a droning voice—seemed to have been hearing it for hours. But he was too tired to open his eyes. It was too much of an effort to tell the owner of the voice to shut up, even though the monotonous sound did prod the throbbing agony in his head. If only he could reach the papers and bag of tobacco on the chair—if only he could build himself a quirly, and fill his lungs with the soothing smoke—

The voice continued without a break, but Buck Burton felt the tobacco and book of

papers pushed beneath his fingers. He grasped them eagerly, and tried to sit up. A hand pushed him back, gently but firmly. And now that voice paused for a moment—then took on the stern tone a father uses with an unruly child.

“You just stay put, Buck Burton! I'll build you that quirly!”

Buck Burton was too weak to resist, when fingers took the makings from his clutching hand—too weak yet to open his eyes. But his mind was clearing. He knew that, because he recognized the voice as old Doc Winters'. Doc Winters, Cuchillo's only sawbones! His lips moved to ask the

questions which his dazed brain could not form, but Doc Winters spoke again, brusquely.

"You keep shet, Buck Burton. All the talkin' thet needs to be done for a spell, I'll do."

Buck Burton's bloodless lips writhed in an effort to speak, but no words came. He was conscious of a mixture of anger at his weakness, and wonder at the cause of it. The last he remembered, he was—. A sharp breath burst from his lips. The last he remembered, he was facing "Rap" Gruber, on the sidewalk in front of the bank! Gruber was coming out sideways, a six-gun in one hand and a bag of the bank's currency in the other.

"Doc—did Rap Gruber—get—"

"Steady, Buck! Steady!" the old sawbones spothed. "You lay right quiet!"

"But Doc—I've got to—know! Did Gruber—"

GRIZZLED Doc Winters looked down at Buck Burton's hand that still held the unlighted quiry, and a glint of admiration flickered in his eyes for a moment. As steady as the peaks of the San Juans that towered over Cuchillo—that was Sheriff Buck Burton. Not a tremor in that stubby-fingered hand, in spite of the tumult that must be swirling in Buck's brain. The old sawbones nodded to himself.

"Reckon you can take it, Buck. If you'll promise to lay still, I'll tell you!"

"Go ahead, Doc!"

The doctor's brow furrowed for a moment, as if he was searching for the best way to begin. Then he drew a long breath. A straight-out story—that's what Buck Burton would be wanting.

"Rap Gruber was too fast for you, Buck. He shot from his hip—creased you before you could drag yore gun." Doc Winters leaned a little forward, his eyes upon the prone man. "An' when you was down, he whirled—an' drilled young Burt square through the heart. Didn't a soul on the street dare to lift a hand—not even when he forked his hoss, and took the trail. I ain't thin-skinned, Buck—but when thet coyote stood over Tommy Burt, an' laughed in thet sneerin' way of his, I—"

Buck Burton's thin, wide mouth and square chin, visible beneath the bandage that covered the upper part of his face, seemed to be chiseled from brown rock—tight, hard, expressionless. But now those stubby fingers told that Doc Winters' words

had come close to cracking his iron nerve. For the fingers contracted slowly, remorselessly, crushing the cigarette—twisting it, spilling the tobacco in brown flecks on the faded blue flannel shirt. For only a fleeting instant that square chin quivered—then the fingers slowly relaxed. The thin lips opened only a crack.

"He drilled Tommy Burt, huh? Go on, Doc!"

"He stood there laughin', Buck, until Tommy was plumb still. You was draped over the edge of the sidewalk, yore head on the slabs an' yore heels in the dust. He lifted his six-gun, like as if he aimed to plug you again. But I reckon he figured you was plenty dead. He took his time climbin' into his saddle, while his men kept the crowd covered."

Doc Winters paused, and Buck Burton's fingers drummed on the chair-seat beside the bunk. "He—plugged Tommy Burt—an' nobody lifted—a hand!" The words slid stiffly from Buck Burton's thin lips.

"Didn't dare to, Buck—not with you an' Tommy stretched out on the ground. Likely they figured you an' Tommy—Sheriff an' Deputy—was paid to take chances, but it wasn't none of their business."

Buck Burton's voice held an edge that brought a startled gasp to the old sawbones' lips. "None of their business, huh? None of their business thet Tommy Burt died—with Rap Gruber's bullet in his heart? Thet Gruber an' his long-riders raided the Cuchillo Bank in broad day? Thet they run their bluff on the town—an' made it stick? Don't yuh see what thet means, Doc?"

"Yeah—I—see!" Doc Winters said slowly. "It means thet Gruber wasn't foolin' none, when he 'lowed he'd be back, as soon as the stage brought the roundup payroll money down from the road!"

For a full minute Buck Burton lay stiff and silent, as the old sawbones' words sunk deep into his brain. Sudden death was nothing new to him. For twenty years, as Sheriff of Pinion County, he had been dealing it—and seeing it in turn snatch friends and acquaintances. But when death struck Tommy Burt so cruelly and needlessly, that was something else. Tommy Burt, who had been like a son as well as a deputy—laughing, curly-haired Tommy. Slowly the smoldering fire in his brain grew into a blaze.

He heaved himself to a sitting position, and his fingers fumbled the bandage that covered his eyes. Doc Winters leaped to

his feet, and grasped Buck Burton's fingers, pulling them forcibly from the bandage.

"Buck, you blasted idiot! Do you want to go blind for keeps?"

Buck Burton's hand dropped to his side. "Blind?" His voice was suddenly thin and reedy. "Blind? Yuh—yuh mean—there's somethin' the—matter with my eyes?"

"What d'you reckon we've got thet bandage over 'em for? Goin' to be plenty hard to save yore sight, with the best of care—but if you get proddy—"

"Go—away—Doc! Leave me alone—for a spell!"

Buck Burton slumped back to the bunk. He hardly heard the old doctor's grumbling, or the sound of his dragging footsteps as he left the room. Blind! He might even now be blind! That was something he had never thought of before—never imagined striking him. There flashed into his mind the memory of the blind man he had seen up at the road. He remembered him walking up and down the platform of the railroad station on the arm of a woman, laughing and talking. But plainer still was the picture of the man sitting alone on a bench, while the woman was gone for a few minutes attending to the baggage. Alone, the blind man's face held a stricken, almost terrified expression.

H E COULD understand the man's feelings now—the terrible feeling of being alone—of the world sweeping past on each side without so much as touching him. He knew now what it would be like never to see again—never to catch the color of the cactus blossoms after the first spring rain—never to feel the shiver of awe, as his gaze swept up to the towering peaks—never to see the dancing mirages, or the whirling dust-devils in the dusty street. Never to—

His hands clenched at his sides, and his jaws tightened. Never to ride the high country again on the trail of a killer or rustler—never to feel the grim satisfaction of seeing an outlaw placed behind the bars, or on Deacon Underhill's slab by his hand—the hand of the law. Blind! a hopeless, helpless man, groping his way through the world alone!

For an hour Buck Burton lay on the bunk, fighting that feeling of panic. Slowly, and with a bitter effort that left him white and weak again, he conquered

it, until it was only a throbbing hurt in his heart like the throbbing in his head. And as that feeling receded, grim and deadly wrath crept in to take its place—wrath that centered upon that swaggering killer, Rap Gruber.

More plainly because of the darkness that engulfed him, the picture of those grim minutes formed in his brain. The single shot from up at the bank—he and Tommy Burt racing toward the sound—men popping like rabbits from the doors of the drab buildings along the street, and following them.

The first glimpse of the four saddled horses at the hitchrail in front of the bank—the excitement on young Tommy Burt's face, as he caught the first sight of two armed men backing from the bank—his own grim tenseness, as he realized what had happened, and what was due to happen right sudden. Then Rap Gruber, sidling from the bank—his own hand darting for his six-gun butt—the sudden explosion—and darkness. Almost as plain was the part Doc Winters had supplied.

"He gunned—Tommy Burt!" Buck's tight lips muttered. "Gunned Tommy—and made off with the bank's cash! Bragged he'd be back when the roundup payroll comes in! Bluffed Cuchillo, an' made it stick!"

Then the thing that had been beating at the back of his brain forced itself onto him. His hands clenched convulsively, and his breath came in a gasp.

"An'—me—blind!" The words were hardly more than a thin whisper. "Blind! Can't swap lead with him! Can't see him—"

He forced himself to a sitting position again. His head reeled, and fire-balls seemed to burst in front of his aching eyes. He shook his head as if to clear it of the dizzy agony. He swung his feet around and touched the floor. With every move a wave of pain, he stood erect, swaying on his weak legs.

His hands started haltingly toward the bandage over his eyes, but dropped before they reached it. He didn't dare test it—yet. Fingers groping before him, he made his way to the south wall of the little room. He felt along the slabs, until he touched the peg. A long, quivering breath escaped his lips, as he grasped the filled gunbelt that hung on the peg. He lifted it down, and buckled it around his middle.

Now he weaved back to the bunk, and slumped onto it again. Then he gritted

his teeth in a grim effort to conquer the panic that swept over him at what he was about to do. His hand lifted slowly, almost reluctantly toward the bandage. In another dozen seconds he would see whether his eyes were gone or not. He fumbled for the fastening at the back of his head, his fingers clumsy from the fear that gripped him.

The flat knots loosened slowly beneath his touch. One bandage dropped to the bunk, and he caught his breath sharply. Everything was still dark. Shakily he fumbled again. There was still another layer of soft cloth, and he felt a surge of relief sweep over him as if he had been granted another few minutes of life. Then that last bandage was off!

Buck Burton's fingers touched his closed lids—but for a long moment he did not dare open them—did not dare put his eyes to the test. But now his seething brain forced the message to his lids. Slowly they blinked open. A gasp that was half a groan of despair came from Buck Burton's lips—for only velvety darkness greeted his wide eyes. Although he had been prepared for just that, the realization was like a physical blow.

Slowly he picked up the bandages and replaced them as best he could. Weakness was sweeping over him again—the weakness of reaction from his mental turmoil as well as from his wound. He scarcely remembered knotting the last bandage, for he was swaying dizzily, and his senses were leaving him. His hands fell nervelessly, and he slumped back on the bunk.

How long he was unconscious he did not know. And it was old Doc Winters' flat voice that awakened him this time, too. For an instant he did not remember—but as he felt the bandages against his lids, he knew. But now, when he forced himself to a sitting position, he realized that his strength had returned in almost full measure.

"You're lookin' stronger, Buck," the old sawbones said in his best bedside manner. "'Pears like thet bullet didn't do much harm to you—except yore eyes. Mebbe they ain't even hurt as bad as I figured. Just wear thet bandage another day or two, an' we'll see if—"

Buck Burton's lips opened only a trifle, and the voice that came from them was raspy with bitterness. "I'm blind, Doc—stone blind! Ain't nothin' yuh can do for me!"

"Now Buck, you're goin' off half-cocked! You don't know—an' I don't know whether yore eyes'll be any worse off than before you got creased!"

"I—know—Doc! An' we won't talk about it no more! What I'm honin' to know concerns Rap Gruber an' his outfit! Is there a posse out on his trail? Is anybody doin' anything about him? Have yuh had any news—"

"Steady, Buck!" the old doctor grunted. "There ain't no posse out. You'd ought to know thet. Nobody to round up a posse—nobody to head it. Tommy Burt is—is dead. An' you're—"

"Yeah, I'm blind! No good—worthless! But thet ain't no reason why Cuchillo should set on its hunkers, an' let thet murderin' skunk get clean away!"

"Now Buck, there ain't no use of trailin' Rap Gruber. He's holed up somewhere in the high country. No danger of him showin' up here again—until the roundup payroll comes in. An' thet's three weeks off. Most anything can happen before then."

"Yeah—he did say—he'd be back then!" The words slid between Buck Burton's tight lips. "Said he'd be on hand to grab off the roundup payroll."

"But maybe he was only foolin'—"

BUCK BURTON'S upraised hand stilled the old sawbones' words. He sat on the edge of the chair, and watched the play of grim emotions across Buck Burton's face with pitying eyes. For a full minute Buck Burton did not speak again. Then he lifted his face as if he could see Doc Winters.

"Yuh ain't told anybody I'm—I'm blind, Doc?"

Doc Winters shook his head—then realized that Buck Burton could not catch the gesture. "I jest said you was creased, Buck. Why, I ain't sure you are blinded. Maybe—"

"I'm blind, right enough—blind for keeps. But I don't want anybody to know it before they have to—not before Rap Gruber shows up again, at least!"

"But we'll know for sure in a day or two, when I take off them bandages!"

"Yuh ain't takin' the bandages off, Doc—not until I say the word. Yuh're tellin' them thet asks thet I'm still knocked out from Rap Gruber's bullet. I—I ain't honin' for no sympathy—don't want to be led around by the arm—don't want no pityin' words an' looks! Blast it, Doc, I'd a heap

sooner Rap Gruber had plugged me center, than to've blinded me!"

The old doctor shook his head as he rose. "You'll be all right, Buck—long before Rap Gruber shows up in Cuchillo again. You'll be as good as new, an' ready to face that coyote, when the pay-roll is due. But I won't say nothin' to nobody."

Buck Burton knew different. He was as blind as a bat—and would be as long as he lived. He was certain of that. When Doc Winters clumped from the little room, he lay back on the bunk, clenching his hands into tight fists, stiffening his trembling chin, and fighting with all his strength against the feeling of panic. And gradually he knew a little calmness.

But for the first week he could think of nothing but the blindness that had struck him down. He spent hours fighting to keep his nerves from cracking—hours that left him weak and trembling. Between those spells, he shuffled around the room, accusing himself to caring for himself without sight. Doc Winters visited him twice a day, and those visits were tough for Buck Burton, for his pride forced him to keep from showing the bitterness that held him.

The nights were as bad as the days, for fearful dreams troubled his sleep—dreams in which he groped his way through a world peopled by unseen monsters—worse dreams in which men showered him with pity and maudlin sympathy. But on the sixth night his dream was strangely different—a dream in which he faced Rap Gruber, blinded as he was—faced him on even terms, and bested him. And he woke from that dream refreshed, soothed by a calmness that he had not known before.

There was a faint smile on his lips, a feeling of excitement as if something pleasant was about to happen. Several times he was conscious of footsteps on the gravel outside, but he paid no attention until he caught a familiar crunch. He nodded to himself. Doc Winters—hurrying a little, but Doc Winters, right enough. Then he jerked erect, and drew a sharp breath. He had picked out those footsteps—recognized them among several he had heard in the last two or three hours.

Strange. He had never noticed footsteps before—wouldn't have known Doc Winters' from Deacon Underhill's. They had all sounded alike—but now—A half memory came to him of something he had heard or read. A man who loses one sense is compensated by the quickening of others. Hear-

ing becomes keener to one who cannot see. That was it! His ears were sharper now! He listened again—and picked out sounds that he would never have heard when his eyes were good.

He scarcely knew when the old doctor opened the door and clumped across the room to his accustomed chair. His mind was playing with this new knowledge. Barring the fact that he could not see, he was a better man than he had ever been—probably the best man on the range. Take away Rap Gruber's sight, and the killer wouldn't have a chance with him! Not a chance!

Doc Winters' words dragged him back to realities. He leaned forward, reading the excitement in the old sawbones' usually even, monotonous voice.

"The pay-roll's comin' in early, Buck—day after tomorrow night! Sam Burdette figured he'd slip up on Rap Gruber—bring the pay-roll in by buckboard in the dark—only the driver—no guards! Scatter the money among the different spreads before that murderin' coyote got a chance at it!"

Buck Burton nodded. "Smart thinkin', Doc!"

"Yeah—smart thinkin'!" Doc Winters said bitterly. "Except for one thing! He talked where Sonora Bates could hear him!"

"Sonora Bates? Thet tinhorn gambler, up at the Last Chance? But what's thet got to do with it?"

"Sonora Bates hightailed it out of Cuchillo this mornin'—headin' for the high country!"

Buck Burton was silent for a moment, but the full meaning of that statement struck him instantly. At last he spoke slowly. "So Sonora Bates is hooked up with Rap Gruber, huh? Carryin' word to Gruber's hideout!"

"An' there's nothin' we can do about it now!" Doc Winters said. "Burdette has already sent his driver up to the road. Maybe we could head him off, but likely Rap Gruber would—"

"What does Burdette think of it?" Buck Burton broke in.

"Ain't said nothin' to him. Nobody but me knows Sonora Bates left Cuchillo. He rode before sunup—an' I wouldn't have seen him if I hadn't been just gettin' in from a call. I aimed to get yore idea on it before I told anyone."

FOR a full five minutes Buck Burton sat on the edge of his bunk, lips tight and jaws set. And when he spoke, the words slid between his teeth.

"Rap Gruber could stick up the driver on the trail—but he won't. I know that hombre! He promised to raid Cuchillo when the pay-roll came in, an' he'll do it! He wouldn't miss gettin' a good laugh on this town again."

"But I don't see what difference it makes where or when he grabs the pay-roll money. It'll be just as far gone, one way or the other."

"We could set a guard, ready to cut him down when he makes a pass at the bank," Buck Burton said slowly.

"Not in Cuchillo! These yaller-bellied town hombres are scared to death. They wouldn't take a chance."

"Reckon mebbe yuh're right," Buck Burton said slowly. "But mebbe—" A smile flicked across his face, and he leaned closer to Doc Winters. "Listen, Doc! The pay-roll is comin' in tomorrow night—an' Rap Gruber won't be wastin' no time. The driver won't no more than have it unloaded an' in the bank safe, before Rap Gruber pulls his raid! Ain't that right?"

"Right—if I know Rap Gruber!" Doc Winters grunted.

"An' he'll pull it alone—leavin' his outfit in the street, huh?"

"Yeah! He'll want all the credit for it!"

"All right! Then don't say a word to anyone about Sonora Bates leavin'—or what yuh think is due to happen! That'll be our secret—an' I think I know what to do!"

"You mean you—you ain't—"

"I'd sooner be dead than blind for keeps!" Buck Burton said bitterly. "An' if I can take that murderin' skunk—that sneer-in' killer that cut Tommy Burt down—"

"But you can't, Buck! You can't face Rap Gruber—not with that bandage over yore eyes! He's pizen with his six-guns! You know that!"

"I'm still the sheriff, Doc—until the county finds out I'm blind! It's my duty to see that the laws are obeyed, an' I'll do it my own way. I'm countin' on yuh helpin' me, Doc! I'm deputizin' yuh!"

"You're—you're—" The old doctor shook his head. "It's yore funeral, you hard-headed mule—an' I'll help you all I can."

"Good!" Buck Burton leaned still further forward, and spoke in a half-whisper, swiftly. Doc Winters nodded, but did not break in until the other had finished.

"I think it's a damn-fool idea, Buck Burton—but like some fool ideas, it might work! You can count on me!"

The next two days dragged on feet of

lead for Buck Burton. Doc Winters visited his little shack two or three times each day, and each time he reported that everything was going as usual—that no one had suspected the reason for Sonora Bates' absence. As he made the last visit on the afternoon of the second day, Buck Burton gave the old doctor his last instruction. There would be no time for talk, when Doc Winters came for him as soon as darkness settled.

His sharpened senses told Buck Burton when dusk began to change to velvet blackness—a perceptible cooling of the air—a hint of moisture that freshened the scent of sagebrush—the first call of a night bird—things he would never have noticed before he was blinded.

Then he caught the sound of Doc Winters' footsteps, even though the old sawbones walked stealthily—almost silently. Buck Burton rose from his bunk, stepped to the wall and lifted down his filled gunbelt. A surge of satisfaction swept over him, as he realized that there was no hesitation, no fumbling and stumbling in that movement. And now a tenseness that was both grim and exciting gripped him.

Doc Winters opened the door softly, and slipped inside. Buck Burton could catch his uncertain footsteps as he made his way into the dark room. He laughed shortly, sharply. "Yore eyes ain't doin' yuh no good, are they, Doc? A blind man is as good as one who can see—in the dark, huh?"

"Blast it, Buck—are you still set on that fool idea?"

"More set than ever, Doc! I've been thinkin' of nothin' else for two days—an' I still think it'll work!"

"I hate to think of it, Buck—but in another couple of hours I'll be sayin', 'He was a good man, while he was alive.'"

"Yeah—or else: 'The range wasn't safe for life or property, as long as he lived.'"

"I hope you're right, Buck—but I ain't got a heap of—"

Doc Winters stopped short, for the thud of hoofs and the creak of wheels came from out on the street. Buck Burton took a step across the dark room, and his hand touched Doc Winters' arm.

"The buckboard, Doc! Look out of the window! Watch an' see if it stops at the bank!"

Doc Winters grunted a wordless reply, and turned to obey. After a breathless minute, he whispered over his shoulder: "It's the pay-roll buckboard, Buck! Stopped at

the bank! Sam Burdette is carryin' the canvas bag inside!"

"Any sign of Rap Gruber?" Buck Burton asked tensely.

"No sign, Buck!"

"Keep yore eyes peeled! There won't be much time! Ten chances to one Rap Gruber has been watchin' for the buckboard—likely ridin' this way right now!"

Now the crunch of wheels came plainly again, and Doc Winters spoke softly. "Sam Burdette is in the rig, alongside the driver! Left a lamp, burnin' low, in the bank!"

"Left—a lamp—burnin'!" Buck Burton's voice was halting—tense. "I was sort of countin'—"

"If you're still set on goin' through with it, it's time to be goin'!" Doc Winters grunted. "But I still think you're signin' yore own death warrant!"

BUCK BURTON nodded slowly. He thought so too, now. Funny that a little thing like the tiny flame of a lamp should make so much difference—should spell the difference between life and death. But there was no thought of backing out now. His lips twisted bitterly. After all, he would rather be dead than blind for life. And if he could just take Rap Gruber with him—

"All set, Doc!" he said tersely.

Keeping to the shadows of the squat buildings, ducking into still deeper shadows when any sign of movement appeared on the almost deserted street, Doc Winters guided Buck Burton toward the bank. In a scant five minutes they halted at the back door of the bank. Doc Winters' grip tightened on Burton's arm.

"It ain't too late to call it quits, Buck!"

"Open the door, Doc!"

Doc Winters shook his head, as he fished in his pocket for the skeleton key Buck Burton had supplied him. The lock clicked, and the narrow back door creaked open.

"Lead me to a chair in front of the safe, Doc!"

"And the lamp?" Doc Winters asked, as he guided the sheriff through the dark hallway and into the dim radiance of the flickering oil lamp.

"Leave it burnin'. If yuh should put it out, Sam Burdette would notice, an' come to investigate. I aim to handle this alone!"

Doc Winters grunted hopelessly, as he dragged a chair to a spot squarely in front of the big safe. Buck Burton felt it behind

his knees, and dropped into it. Then he lifted his hand.

"Now put the lamp alongside of me, Doc—where the light will shine square in my face!"

"Where the light—why blast it, Buck! You're crazier than a locoed yearlin'! Rap Gruber'll—"

"He'll see me, Doc—an' that's what I aim to happen! It wouldn't be right for Rap Gruber to die—without knowin' thet I blasted the life out of him!"

"But he'll get you first, Buck!"

"Yeah—he'll get me! But there ain't no bullet thet can kill me so quick thet I can't down him before I die!"

"Buck Burton, I'd ought to—"

"Yuh're takin' orders from me, Doc! I'm still sheriff—an' yuh're my deputy! Now get out—while the gettin's good! Remember the signal!"

Doc Winters' voice almost broke, as he stepped toward the dark corridor. "You're a blasted fool, Buck Burton—but you've got sand in yore craw—you're a hombre to ride the river with!"

"Get, Doc!" Buck Burton snapped.

When the back door closed so softly that only Buck Burton's sharpened ears could hear the sound, he drew a long, quivering breath. With Doc Winters gone, he felt strangely alone. It wasn't that he feared Rap Gruber—or the death that he was sure hovered over him. It was rather a panicky, helpless feeling—the same feeling that held him in its grip when first he knew he was blind.

He drew his six-gun from its holster and examined it with a more sensitive touch than he knew he possessed. Then he laid it in his lap. Now he sniffed softly, catching the faint, musty odor of papers and ink. He listened intently, and smiled mirthlessly at the sharpness of his ears. Why, he could even hear the rustling of a mouse that scampered over the floor off in the corner.

For a few minutes these things served to relax the grim tension in his brain—but only for minutes. Back again was that strange feeling that must come to every man when he faces death. The hand that clutched the butt of his six-gun tightened until his nails were bloodless. The lines in his face beneath the wide bandage deepened. He leaned forward in his chair, every nerve and muscle as tight as piano wire.

Then it came—that low, trilling whistle from the corner of the bank building. Buck

Burton stiffened—waited. Now the sound again—and again. Three! Rap Gruber and three of his outfit! Only three! Buck Burton smiled mirthlessly. Rap Gruber apparently feared Cuchillo hardly at all. A wave of killing wrath swept Buck Burton, for now he was remembering the last time he faced the killer—remembering Tommy Burt, cut down coldly and mercilessly.

But the sound of footsteps on the slab porch of the bank building changed that wrath to cold, deadly determination, much more dangerous. He separated, with his sharpened sense of hearing, the different sounds that marked Rap Gruber's movements. The whistle had not sounded again, so Buck Burton knew Rap Gruber was coming into the bank alone. He smiled a little, as he pictured Doc Winters, hidden behind the water barrel just across the street from the bank. Doc would be biting his lips, clenching and unclenching his fists in an agony of excitement and dread.

Then the click of a lock and the soft creak of the door. Buck Burton stiffened, as Rap Gruber's steps came forward—then stopped abruptly. He caught the sharply drawn breath that came from the killer's lips. Now Buck Burton spoke, low but sharply.

"We meet again, yuh murderin' lobo! Yuh see me—but this time I can't see yuh! Yuh blinded me, Rap Gruber—but yuh didn't kill me!"

Rap Gruber laughed shortly, sharply but with a note of relief in the laugh. "My ol' friend, the sheriff, huh? Blind an' helpless, but still the brave officer! Too bad I didn't kill yuh before, Burton! But it ain't too late yet!"

"Not too late, Gruber! Yuh'll down me, but yuh'll go along with me!"

Again Gruber laughed a little shakily. "Yuh talk big, Burton, but I can shade yuh when yore eyes are workin'. Blind, yuh ain't got a chance!"

BUCK BURTON smiled, there in the circle of ruddy light from the oil lamp. "Yuh're on top now, Rap Gruber! Yuh've got yore two eyes, an' I'm plumb blind! But if yuh should lose that advantage, I'd have yuh beat a thousand ways. My ears are sharper—my nose is keener! Why, I could smell yore stinkin' carcass for a mile! Yeah, Gruber, if the light should go out all at once, jest like this—"

Buck Burton's left hand shot out, and crashed the lamp to the floor with a start-

lingly sudden movement. In a fraction of an instant the room was plunged into pitch darkness. And at the same moment Buck Burton hurled himself from the chair and rolled to one side.

Rap Gruber cursed shrilly, and triggered his six-gun. The bullet spatted against the iron safe and shrilled off into the wall. Buck Burton laughed deep in his throat from the floor.

"Yuh see, Gruber! Now we're even—as far as eyes go! But I've got yuh bested on every count! Yuh thought yuh was crackin' down on me, but yuh missed me by yards! Now I'm sendin' a bullet over yore head! So close that yuh can feel the wind of it! Like this!"

Buck Burton's six-gun roared, and a gasping sigh came from Rap Gruber's lips as the bullet almost creased him. Again Buck Burton laughed. He had placed Rap Gruber exactly by that sigh, and his six-gun turned slightly to cover the man. But there was one thing that he had overlooked—the flash of flame from his own gun. And it served as a guide for Rap Gruber's next bullet. Buck Burton heard its roar—felt the blow like a club on his left shoulder. Too late he knew what had happened.

He tried to sit up on the floor, but weakness was sweeping over him. His head reeled, and already a deathly agony was tearing at his lungs. He tried to lift the six-gun, but his strength was not enough. Jerkily he brought his left hand across his body, and both clutched the gun butt.

With a last effort he forced a momentary clearing of his senses. He caught the slight shuffle of Rap Gruber's feet—heard the man's swift, excited breathing. Slowly the gun came up. Buck Burton's teeth clenched and his face twisted with the grim effort. But now it was high enough. He squeezed the trigger with his last ounce of strength. The report bellowed and the recoil jerked the gun from his hands.

He slumped backward on the floor, but before darkness swept over him, he heard the thud of Rap Gruber's body—knew instinctively that his bullet had gone true.

"He—got me—but he's takin'—the same trail!" Buck Burton breathed.

Hours later Buck Burton awoke—and for a moment his dazed brain told him that he was awakening once more from his first meeting with Rap Gruber. The same monotonous voice that had beat in his ears was droning now. But he was too tired

to open his eyes—too weak to tell old Doc Winters to shut up.

Then it came to him with a bitter rush. No use to open his eyes. He was blind—stone blind. That was one thing that he could never erase from his mind. And Rap Gruber had not killed him, there in the bank. He felt almost resentful. He had been ready, willing to die. Death was better than perpetual blindness.

But he was weak, deathly weak. And grim agony tore at his chest. Perhaps he would die, after all. Never have to face life sightless and helpless. Better! Much better! Doc Winters had no business trying to save him—bandaging him up—watching over him! If only he could tear those bandages from his chest, he might hurry it along. His hands started weakly up the blanket, feeling, groping—

The monotonous voice stopped abruptly, and feet pounded on the floor. Fingers grasped Buck Burton's hands and held them from his wound. Doc Winters spoke sharply.

"Buck, you blasted fool! You've got a chance, if you'll only make a fight for it!"

"Fight? Fight—to live—blind an'—alone?" Buck Burton's lips twisted wryly.

But now other feet pounded on the floor, and Buck Burton caught his breath sharply. At first he could not believe it! But it was true—that dim radiance that forced itself through his closed lids. Slowly, with fearful dread of disappointment, he opened his eyes. Now he could make out hazy movements, and the flickering of flame of a lamp above him. Slowly his eyes focused. He could see!

"Doc! Doc! I—I can see! I'm not blind, Doc! I can see!"

Doc Winters blinked and leaned closer, startled. Then a lump came up into his

throat at the expression of indescribable joy that lighted up Buck Burton's face. Never, if he lived to be a hundred, would Doc Winters forget that look.

Then Buck Burton spoke again. "But—but I was blind, Doc! I took the bandage off! I couldn't see! Not an hour after you left me the first time! What—what happened, Doc?"

Doc Winters drew a long breath. "An hour after I left yuh, huh? Why, that was the middle of the night, Buck! Of course you couldn't see in the dark! Not even an owl—"

Then the look of happiness faded from Buck Burton's face for a moment. "But Rap Gruber, Doc! Did he—did I—"

"Rap Gruber's dead, Buck! Yore bullet drilled him center! An' his outfit are behind the bars. Cuchillo was afraid of Gruber—not his gun-slingers. We rounded 'em up the minute we knowed Rap Gruber had passed in his chips. An' now if you'll jest—"

But a soft smile played across Buck Burton's lips. He closed his eyes again. "I'm a little tired now, Doc! But be sure to wake me up in time for breakfast. Yuh can tell me the rest then."

DOC WINTERS looked down at Buck Burton for a moment—noted the even breathing—the color that was coming back to his face, and nodded in satisfaction. He turned to the man who held the lamp.

"He'll be well on the road by mornin', Deacon. You'll have to wait a good long time before he'll be needin' yore services."

Deacon Underhill's face still held the solemn expression that was the trade mark of his profession. But his voice was sincere. "Never was a time I was so glad to be beat out of a good funeral, Doc!"





Dode didn't see the man waiting in the tree.

Cowboy: Say Your Prayers!

by **MOJAVE LLOYD**

The gun-slick hellions of big Red Fulton blazed a raw, red trail across the Klamath range, until Dode Steele took up their challenge to slash-brand them for Satan's own corral!

EAGERNESS shone in the gray eyes of Dode Steele as he urged his tired pack train down the treacherous trail into Snake-Eye Canyon near the headwaters of the Klamath. Dusk was beginning to shroud the timbered hills and rocky gorges in a mantle of purple, but that wasn't why Dode was impatient.

He was headed for the little placer camp of the Bentons. After supper they would sit around a fragrant manzanita fire—he and Judith Benton and the tough old dad the girl worshipped. Maybe Judith would strum on her guitar, with firelight dancing in her red-gold hair. Maybe she would sing some haunting old Mexican canciones.

Steele struck a bend from where he could look down on the tiny camp. The sight that met his eyes stopped him as though his boot soles had taken root.

On the little willow-bordered flat, tucked in a bend of the river, he made out Judy and her father. The pint-sized old man was on the ground, shaking his fist at a towering man whose shaggy hair shone a fiery red. Dode Steele crowded past his pack horses and hurled his big roar gelding recklessly down the trail.

Fears churned in his mind. He had been afraid for months of something like this—ever since that night when he and big Red Fulton had run into one another at Deadwood Bar. Almost eighteen months had passed since he and Red had labored at adjoining machines in the jute mill in grim San Quentin Penitentiary, but mutual recognition had been instantaneous.

Since then, big Red had come into the money. Now he had a gold dredge two miles down the river. But Dode Steele had gone straight—slaved away with his pack train carrying supplies to mines and lumber camps. One consuming hope cheered his lonely trails—to earn enough money to stock a little cattle ranch high in the Siskiyous. Another two or three months and he would have the precious money saved.

One other hope glowed in Dode Steele's heart—centering in Judy Benton. But Dode daredn't voice that one, even to himself. Not yet!

He struck the sandy flat in a shower of pebbles and lit on his heels while the gelding was still on the dead run. Settling the waist band of his faded levis firmly on his slim hips, he faced the towering red-head and jerked a thumb toward where old Alf Benton lay.

"You do that?" he inquired.

BIG Red Fulton licked his thin lips and stared at him stonily with cold slaty eyes. The two men were a study in contrasts. Dode Steele was tall and slender, his rugged wind-tanned face set with candid gray eyes, the whole of him as clean as the wind-tossed pine and fir of the high country he so loved. Red Fulton was huge and brawny, with the massive power of an animal, handsome in his wild, hard way. His great hands were twitching.

"Not by a jugful, he didn't!" chirped little old Alf Benton. "He ain't man

enough! I just told him off our claim. That's why his collar seems too tight."

Out of the corner of his eye, Dode Steele noticed for the first time that Benton was lying on a blanket. But he kept his gaze on Red Fulton's twitching hands.

"Nobody knocked me down," Benton sputtered. "I fell down—fell clean down a danged talus slide. What I done to my back, Doc Seely figgers it will take a trip to a San Francisco hospital to fix. But all pill-rollers is born liars. I'll be well in a week.

The cocky little oldster squirmed painfully up on one scrawny elbow and blinked up at Steele with near-sighted blue eyes. "I feel pert already, Dode, now you're here," he chirped. His cracked voice took on a wistful tone. "Maybe you could fix it to lay over for a few days and give me and Judy a hand with the gold pannin', eh son?"

The cords in Steele's bronzed neck seemed to tighten. He shot a side glance at Judith. Her sunbonnet had fallen back from her head, framing her small oval face and unruly red-gold hair in flowered calico. She was nervously tossing what looked like a shining yellowish pebble from one tiny brown hand to the other. Her soft hazel eyes were fixed on Dode's face with a hopeful expression.

How could he tell her that if he failed to make his monthly report to the parole officer at Yreka the next day he would be thrown back into San Quentin!

His calm eyes locked with the venomous eyes of the tense red-head. "Fulton," he said quietly, "you'd best pull your freight." Then his gaze snapped back to those twitching hands.

He decided those great hands had twitched about as long as they were likely to. The viselike fingers were curling now. The big man was so mad his judgment of distance might be a trifle off. Dode deliberately switched his gaze to the girl's pale face. It came!

Big Red Fulton's right fist bunched and swept upward like a viper's head, looping viciously straight for Steele's chin. Dode let it come, till the last bare instant. Then his hand snapped sidewise. Fulton's fist whistled past his ear. Judy screamed thinly.

The force of the blow swept the brawny red-head clear off balance. Dode's right shot out, clamped on a fistful of shirt collar and yanked. As the huge body lunged past, Steele pivoted at the knees. Putting

every ounce of his hundred and seventy pounds into the blow, he chopped his left low down into Fulton's ribs.

Big Red pitched face foremost into the ashes of the dead fire. His shaggy head collided with the butt of a log with a solid thud. He doubled up, choked, then went limp. Steele jerked him out by the heels and rolled him over.

"Fetch me a bucket of water, Judy," he ordered.

With cold water splashing down on his face, Red Fulton soon gasped and sat up. He peered around dazedly. Dode slopped the rest of the water on top of his head. He heaved groggily to his feet and stood there spraddle-legged, digging ashes out of his eyes with his knuckles and shaking his fiery head. Suddenly his slaty eyes focused on Steele's expressionless face. Murder flamed in them.

Then, to everyone's astonishment, he picked up his hat and staggered off downriver. At the edge of a patch of willow scrub, he stopped and looked back. His voice was like the filing of a saw.

"Con," he rasped, "take it on the lam!" Then he faded from sight in the scrub.

For a space of minutes it was deathly still there on the willow-fringed flat, with the three little tents of the Bentons crouching under the sycamore trees. Dode could hear Judith's quick breathing. The old man's cracked voice sounded like gravel rattling in a can.

"Son," he croaked, "I know a killin' when I smell one!"

Judy thought Dode's elbow with a timid hand. He looked down into her taut face. Her eyes were wide with wonder.

"He called you 'Con,'" she said huskily. "And what did he mean when he said 'lam'?"

Steele swallowed hard. "Men say anything when they're groggy," he explained lamely.

HE PICKED up an axe, crossed the flat to a manzanita thicket and chopped an armful of wood. While he built a fire, the girl helped her father sit up and propped him with blankets. The pungent blue smoke curling up into Dode's face seemed to clear his head. He straightened and wiped his hands on his jeans.

"What caused the trouble?" he asked.

Judith handed him the pebble he had no-

ticed her tossing back and forth. "This!" she said.

"And that ain't the half of it," sputtered old Alf angrily, squinting significantly at his daughter.

Steele's probing gray eyes snapped back to Judith. The girl plucked at a button on her flannel blouse. A slow flush crept upward from her slim neck till it stained her smooth cheeks. Then her chin lifted and a hint of fire glowed in her eyes.

"Red Fulton's been mighty good to us," she exclaimed defensively. "Ever since dad got hurt, a week ago, he's been coming up every evening, cutting our wood and totting our water. He helped pan gravel too. He knows we're only washing out five or six dollars a day, so he offered to lend us the thousand to send dad to San Francisco. And then, just because he offered to take that stone he says is a topaz and maybe get fifty dollars for it, when the buyers along the river are only paying twenty-five, dad up and orders him off."

"Get down to bed-rock, child!" croaked old Alf irritably.

Dode thought for a minute Judy was about to burst into tears. Then she turned and walked slowly away toward the tents, her red-gold head held high.

"That big brick-topped mucker offered the thousand all right, Dode," old Alf resumed in a lowered tone. "But with it he aims to buy Judy. He aims to marry her. And you know, son, how that fool gal is about me—she thinks my old bones assay like platinum. I'm scairt she'll fly off half-cocked and take him up!"

Dode Steele could feel his senses swimming. Dimly he heard the river chuckling over its gravel beds, and pans rattling in the cook tent. The world of his dreams was crashing down around his ears. He glanced down idly at the pebble in his hand, then straightened as if a hot poker had been rammed down his back.

"I'd best round up my string," he said thoughtfully, and strode off toward where his roan was browsing in a patch of buckbrush.

When he located his pack horses he delayed heading for camp and carefully examined the stone Judy had handed to him. The longer he looked at it, the more his suspicions grew.

It was about the size of a small walnut, clear and sparkling, with a faint yellowish tinge, and covered with tiny triangular faces.

Tales of diamonds being panned out right here in California ran through his thoughts. One diamond, he had heard, weighed over twenty carats and sold for several thousand dollars. He poised the crystal on the tips of his fingers and estimated its weight at maybe a couple of ounces. But he didn't know what an ounce would be in carats.

Fishing a bottle out of a pack, he scratched it several times with a point of the crystal, then held it up to the last light of the fading day. Sharp grooves showed in the glass. It might be a topaz though. He had seen plenty of them along the river, and understood that the two gems in the rough resembled one another. But, somehow, this stone looked different than any topaz he had ever seen. Most of them were sort of egg-shaped, whereas this stone was more like a cube. A chance remark of an old prospector clicked in his memory.

He loosened the diamond hitch on the old white lead mare and dug into his tool kit. The prospector had said that a steel file would scratch any gem except a diamond.

With a sharp corner of a little rat-tailed file, he made several strokes over the crystal, then held it up close to his eyes in the gathering darkness. Something like an electric shock went tingling through him. The file didn't appear to have made the slightest mark!

On the way back to camp, ideas clashed in his mind. If the stone was a diamond, it might be worth almost anything—certainly far more than Judith Benton and her dad could wash out of the stubborn gravel of the Klamath in their whole lifetime.

That must be what Red Fulton was after when he tried to get hold of the stone. He wanted to keep Judy from getting the money she so desperately needed for her father's operation, unless she got it from him. Furthermore, as Dode well knew, Fulton's term in the Big House had been for high-jacking placer flumes. And a thug who would do that wouldn't hesitate to rob a defenseless girl.

Grim white lines formed around Dode Steele's kindly mouth. No matter what the cost to himself—no matter whether it caused Judy to view him with contempt the rest of his life—he would go back to camp and make a clean breast of everything.

He would tell of his suspicion that Judy's crystal was a diamond—that Red Fulton was a low-down crook, a ruffian branded with convict stripes. He would tell that he him-

self was also branded with the same searing stripes—that he was worse even than Fulton. Fulton had at least done his time and was free. He himself was only on parole and must report at Yreka tomorrow or go back to prison.

BUT that evening after supper, while the three of them sat around the fire, with the flames throwing leaping figures high among the tufted branches of the sugar-pines, and the night wind sobbing softly over the river, Dode Steele couldn't find the strength to go through with it.

He glanced once more at the brooding fire-lit face of the girl who was more to him than life itself, and decided it would have to be done some other way. He would have to tell Judy of his past, as he had always intended to do, when the proper time came. He got to his feet and clamped his hat on his head.

"Son," barked old Alf, "what you aimin' to do?"

"You ain't changed your mind?" queried Dode. "You won't take that loan of a thousand?"

"Not any!" insisted old Alf stubbornly. "How often I got to tell you I will be fit as a fiddle in a week!"

"No such a thing," contradicted Judy. "Doc Seely told me if that operation isn't performed inside of a month, you'll probably be—" Her voice trembled. "You'll be—dead!"

Steele turned the stone idly in his long fingers. The reflected firelight looked like darting snakes' tongues.

"Well then," he said, "if there ain't no objections, I'll take a little pasear into Deadwood Bar and find out just what this rock is worth."

"You mean," croaked old Alf, "you mean it might be a diamond?"

"I would know a diamond from a dumping, that's about all," Dode told him. "The pack hosses won't stray. I should be back late tomorrow." He whistled the roan gelding to him and plucked his saddle from the ground.

"Dode," gritted the injured old man tightly, "mind you keep an eye peeled."

"Hasta luego!" muttered Dode, and swung into the saddle.

"We'll be looking for you, Dode," called Judith huskily.

But Dode saw that she never took her eyes from the fire.

Until he was well up out of the inky blackness of Snake-Eye Canyon, and several miles below the bend where he could hear Red Fulton's gold dredge rumbling away far down in the river bed, Steele rode with every sense keenly alert. But gradually the turmoil of his bitter thoughts dulled his vigilance. The chill of night was creeping over the mountains. He pulled the collar of his buckskin shirt up around his ears.

The big gelding was racking steadily along through a dense tangle of redshank scrub in a draw leading down toward the Bar. Just ahead loomed a gnarled old sycamore tree, one of its sweeping branches hanging low over the trail. It was when Dode ducked to pass under the limb that he saw a lump on that limb move. But it was too late.

A rope shot under his jaws, snugged tight around his neck and snapped him from the saddle like a whiplash. He struck the ground on his shoulder blades. The earth came up and met the back of his head with the force of a locomotive.

He woke up in a little clearing. The faint saffron light of the rising moon was etching the ragged tops of the eastern ridges. That told Dode it was about eleven o'clock, and that he must have lain there for more than two hours. He struggled to a sitting position. His hat was lying right beside him. From force of habit he put it on.

His aching head began to clear. Realization of what had happened struck him like another blow. His hand rose shakily to the pocket of his shirt. Judy's crystal was gone!

Floundering unsteadily down through the timber till he struck the trail, he wondered aimlessly why he hadn't been killed.

Just as he stepped out under the sycamore tree a twig snapped somewhere in the darkness. He stood there poised, vibrating like a bowstring. Then he heard the rhythmic crunching of a horse's grinders on leaves. Several low whistles brought the roan gelding nickering through the brush. Steele stroked the big beast's velvety muzzle and pulled himself weakly into the familiar old Visalia saddle.

He hesitated. If he failed to report in Yreka the next day, it meant trading his little ranch high in the timbered hills for San Quentin's gloomy walls. But the thought of Judy Benton in danger banished every other consideration from his mind.

With a deadly light now in his calm gray eyes, Dode Steele rode back up the river.

When he emerged from the willows on

Benton's Flat two hours later, the manzanita fire was deserted. But at the sound of the roan's hoofs on the gravel, Judith came slowly from her tent. Dode wondered why she wasn't asleep. The sight of her forlorn little figure brought a film to his eyes.

"I—I—" he began hesitantly.

"You lost my stone!" interrupted the girl. She held out her hand. In her palm, sparkling coldly in the white moonlight, nestled the stone.

"Red Fulton returned it to me," she explained listlessly. "One of his men coming back from town saw you hide it under a boulder. Red said you most likely had a worthless one to give back to me with the assay report. But what brought you back so soon? Red said you must be in Yreka tomorrow."

IT WAS Dode Steele's sinewy hands that were twitching now. He felt cold all over. When he spoke, his voice had a hollow sound. "That crystal was took from me, Judy," he said, "after I'd been knocked cold."

The girl looked up into his haggard face with a hopeless expression in her moist eyes. "You don't look beat up very bad," she said.

Dode started to tell her of the lump on the back of his head, how he had almost had his head snapped off, that if he hadn't happened to turn his collar up because of the cold he would have a rope burn on his neck an inch deep. But he clamped his teeth on the words. That Judy Benton should doubt him turned him sick away inside where it hurt. Without another word, he leaped back into the saddle.

"Dode!" cried Judy fearfully. "Where are you going?"

"I'm riding down to Fulton's dredge," gritted Steele. "I aim to fetch that red wolf back here and make him tell you the truth—or kill him!"

"Dode!" choked Judy imploringly. She made two or three faltering steps toward him.

But Dode Steele rode his spurs with blood in his eyes.

When he wormed his way over the gangplank connecting Red Fulton's dredge with the bank, the throbbing of the blood in his head almost drowned out the hoarse rumble of the ponderous bucket line dumping tons of gravel into the well. Back aft, almost under the boom that towered away

into the darkness, he spied a light and made for it.

Creeping along the wall, he raised up warily and peered through the cracks in a torn blind that covered a small glassless window. At a rickety table in the squalid little cabin, with a black bottle and a greasy deck of cards between them, lolled a flat-nosed thug and big Red Fulton. Both were nodding drowsily in a reeking cloud of whiskey fumes and tobacco smoke.

That's where Dode Steele, blind with pent up fury, lost his head. Without pausing to realize that part of the interior was hidden from his view, he burst through that window, feet-first!

He got the flat-nosed thug nearest him—got him flush on the side of his bristly jaw with a fist like a jack-hammer. But the crash threw Red Fulton to his feet with a sullen roar.

Dode upset him by hurling the table, then leaped for his throat. But right there he realized he should have scouted around a bit. Something that felt like the entire bucket line crashed against the side of his head. Then Fulton mashed a chair down on top of him. Steele barely felt the deck planks slap him in the face.

The first thing he saw afterward was five black crows flapping sleepily through the dawn above the tops of the glistening pines. The first thing he touched was his battered old sombrero, lying close beside his hand. He put it on. Forcing himself to his feet by digging his fingernails into the crevices of a slippery boulder, he peered out of swollen eyes. He was in the tailings pile astern of Fulton's dredge. The hulk was idle.

Crawling aboard, he found the squalid cabin deserted. A gash in his forehead was oozing sticky blood. He bound it up as best he could with his bandanna and tied it with a piece of twine he broke off of a ball on a shelf.

Sometimes staggering along, sometimes crawling, he got back to where he'd cached the roan. After several attempts he regained the saddle. Chilled by the fear that Fulton and his crew had gone to the Benton camp, he headed upstream. Between fits of nausea, he tried to puzzle things out.

Nothing made sense. Twice now, Fulton could have killed him, but instead had tossed him aside like an old rag. He could have been mistaken for dead once, but not twice. It must be that the red-headed ruf-

fian figured he could swing the deal without a killing, and wanted to if he could. But that didn't make sense either. Red Fulton wasn't that breed of bird. Dode gave it up.

It was broad day when he reached the camp. But except for his pack horses feeding peacefully, there wasn't a sign of life. The flaps of all three little tents were closed. He stood uncertainly beside the dead ashes of the fire where he had so often sat and listened to Judy sing canciones. High overhead a hungry red-tailed hawk screamed shrilly.

"That you, Dode?" called old Alf's cracked voice.

Dode found the old man on a cot in his tent, flushed with fury.

"Time you showed up!" he sputtered. "That big fire-topped ox of a Fulton has went and carried Judy off to Deadwood Bar. Said he was takin' her to get that damn pebble assayed, but I know better. That child thinks I'm dyin'. To save me she'd sell her soul. She knows I won't take the lend of money from no man. But I suspicion she's got her a notion if she was married to Fulton I'd have to take it. Son, why the hell ain't you married the child?"

"Alf," Dode told him quietly, "I'm a convict on parole!"

The oldest-looked as if he was going to suffer a stroke of apoplexy. "Damnation!" he squawked, "what's that got to do with it—you're a man! You fan the breeze to Deadwood Bar and collar that little spalpeen of mine before she does me and you a meanness!"

DODE was hitting the saddle with a thigh grip when he heard the last of the tirade.

"And if she don't keep you too busy," squealed the oldster after him, "you take time out to gut-shoot that big red-whiskered pup!"

Dode was tossing his reins over the hitch rail in front of Hornbrook's Assay Office in Deadwood Bar when he heard a footfall behind him. He whirled. Freckled little "Tuffy" Graham polished the deputy's star on his calfskin vest, then stuck his hand out to Steele and grinned wryly.

"Hyah, you gem-thievin' son?" he inquired. "Old Rocky craves to make habla with you."

Dode shook hands heartily. Together the two cronies angled across the dusty street to the sheriff's log cabin office. Dode could

see that he was being raked by the curious eyes of cowhands and miners draped on tilted chairs under the wooden verandah awnings.

Old Rocky King was leaning back in his swivel chair behind his scarred desk, thumbs hooked in his armpits. Against the wall to his left sat big Red Fulton with a scowl on his face. Straight across the desk from the sheriff, Judith Benton perched nervously on the edge of a chair with a paper in her hand. When her eyes met Dode's he saw the paper quiver. Old Rocky inclined his grizzled gray head toward a vacant chair on his right. Dode tossed his hat on the floor and sat down. Tuffy leaned against the door jamb.

Old Rocky cleared his throat noisily. "You are purt' nigh under arrest, Steele," he rumbled. "But Miss Judith, she is hesitating—'a mite before affixin' her 'John Henry' to the complaint."

Red Fulton's thin lips skinned back from his teeth. "Ain't no doubt he's guilty as sin," he rasped. "The assayer says that stone he hid under the boulder—the one Judy's got in her hand—is a topaz. Steele must have knowed my man was keeping an eye on him, so he hid a topaz under that boulder to throw us off the scent and kept the diamond. Why don't you search him?"

Old Rocky glanced at Dode and lifted his jutting eyebrows inquiringly.

"Keno!" Steele said, getting to his feet.

Judith put a hand to her throat. Dode could see the outline of her firm breasts rising and falling.

"No!" she pleaded. With an impulsive movement she crumpled the complaint into a tight ball. "I'm not going through with this!"

"Yes you are!" Dode said firmly. "From now on, young lady, you're doing exactly like I say." He turned to the sheriff and nodded.

"Graham," rumbled Old Rocky. "You're handy at friskin'."

While Tuffy was solemnly doing the searching, Old Rocky appeared to recall something that had been on his mind. He reached into the drawer at his left, lifted out a silver-mounted six-shooter and turned it lovingly in his hands.

"Graham," he grumbled, "did you, like I said, have Ben Brokaw give this old peace-maker a thorough renovatin'?"

"Uh huh," mumbled Tuffy, pulling Steele's boots off and exploring the toes.

Old Rocky broke the gun, rummaged

around till he found a box of shells and thumbed five loads into the cylinder, easing the hammer down on the empty chamber. Then he put the gun back, but apparently forgot to close the drawer.

"Clean as a hound's tooth," announced the freckled deputy, stepping back from Steele and shaping a smoke.

"You didn't look in his hat," rasped Fulton, just a shade too eagerly.

Dode saw Old Rocky's bleak eyes retreat a trifle farther beneath his jutting brows.

Graham twisted a tip on his querly, took the tobacco sack from his teeth, dropped it in his pocket and picked Steele's battered sombrero off the floor. He felt inside it, then paused, his cigarette dangling ludicrously from one corner of his open mouth. Then he tossed the hat on the desk.

Dode knew now why his hat had been left beside him.

The sheriff picked the hat up and ripped the lining out, probed high up in the crown and gave several jerks. He extended his hand and opened it. On his broad palm lay a piece of string and a sparkling crystal about the size of a small walnut!

Judith's indrawn breath was a keen whisper. Outside, a cow pony trotting up the street sounded like a cavalry brigade.

Something—he couldn't quite tell what—was hammering in Dode Steele's bandaged head. His gaze kept shifting from the piece of string to the crystal, and back to the piece of string. He knew Judy's haunted eyes were riveted on him. There was something—if he could only hit upon it. But he couldn't.

Red Fulton's flushed face wore a leering smile. "Guess that settles it!" he rasped.

Old Rocky's swivel chair grated harshly as he swung to face Steele. "What's the story?" he grumbled.

Then Dode got it!

RIPPING the blood-stained bandage from his head, he flung it and the string that had been holding it on the desk. The sheriff picked up the twine and reached and got the piece that had been used to sew the crystal in the crown of Dode's hat and held the two up side by side. Every eye in the room saw instantly that those two pieces of twisted twine were exactly alike!

"I broke that piece I tied my bandage with," Dode explained distinctly, "off a ball on a shelf in the cabin of Fulton's dredge." He extended an accusing forefinger at Red Fulton's face. "Frisk him!"

But big Red Fulton was too quick. With a powerful lunge he hurled himself out of his chair and grabbed for the gun in the open drawer. Old Rocky pivoted in his chair, but not fast enough.

Dode Steele unwound like a steel spring uncoiling. Fulton whipped the pistol up. Steele's chest wasn't three feet from the muzzle when the hammer fell. Gun thunder merged with Judy Benton's scream!

Dode's knotted fist met Fulton's heavy jaw with a bone-shattering smash. Fulton's brawny body arched over the desk and struck against the log wall, then slid soggily to the floor. Steele staggered backward through the smoke swirl, beating the fire out of his shirt front with both hands.

Old Rocky swept the six-gun from the floor, while the trace of an enigmatic smile broke the harshness of his seamed face.

"It ain't often I load her with blanks," he mused. "You see, Miss Judith, when I left that drawer open I calc'lated whichever one was guilty would be the one to go for the artillery."

But Judy was crying brokenly, with the crumpled complaint crushed against her eyes. Dode stepped over and slipped an arm around her shoulders. Tuffy Graham waved curious faces away from the door.

"You reckon, Tuffy," grumbled the sheriff, with a jerk of his head toward Red Fulton, "we got to tote him?"

The little deputy flipped his cigarette out the door, spat on his pudgy hands, grabbed Fulton by the ankles and dragged him away through a rear door leading to the cells. When he came back he handed the sheriff a small buckskin bag. Old Rocky opened it and shook out another sparkling crystal, then dropped the stone back into the bag.

"Cripes!" he growled. "This case is makin' me plumb dizzy." He handed the bag back to Tuffy, together with the stone taken from Steele's hat. "Mosey over to Jad Hornbrook's and see how these assay."

While they waited, Old Rocky and Dode and Judith talked things over. Judy couldn't take her eyes from Dode's face.

"It's plain as a bird's nest in a mare's tail," rumbled the sheriff finally.

"When you was roped, Steele, Fulton lifted the stone you was carryin' and sewed a fake in your hat. Then he give Miss Judith another fake, tellin' her it was the one she had give to you. He kept the good one."

"Then Fulton brung Miss Judith to town,

and when the assayer said her stone was nothin' but a topaz, Red talked her into believin' you'd switched rocks on her. That's how come he didn't bash your head in when he had you—he figgered by makin' you out a thief he'd have a free hand with Miss Judith, besides havin' her rock."

Tuffy Graham hobbled in, his dangling cigarette almost lost in his freckled grin. He laid the stones carefully on the desk. "Jad Hornbrook," he reported, "says both them rocks is topazes!"

"You mean," cried Judy, starting to her feet, "even Red Fulton was fooled?"

"Seems like," agreed the little deputy. "But it ain't no wonder. Hornbrook, he says the one in the sack is the hardest topaz ever he handled—it took a case-hardened file to touch it."

But Dode Steele's thoughts had darted in another direction. "So Red Fulton goes free," he commented grimly.

Old Rocky King shook his grizzled head mournfully. "Nope!" he grumbled. "'Attempted murder with a deadly weapon.' Red was already a two-time loser. This will catch him under the Habitual Criminal Act. He'll get Folsom for life."

"But that parole business," quavered Judy. "Dode can't get to Yreka today!"

Old Rocky shot a glance at the girl. "Dode ever tell you what he went up for?"

"He killed a man that got his needin's," stated the sheriff bluntly. "A drunken half-breed was beatin' a pony with a hickory neckyoke. Dode socked him. It was the 'breed's own funeral if his neck broke."

"Ease your mind, child," concluded Old Rocky. "That parole officer in Yreka is old Buck Farley. Him and I used to ride the river together."

DODE STEELE and Judy Benton too rode the river together—stirrup to stirrup up the gleaming Klamath through the golden haze of early afternoon. Occasionally Judy put her hand up to the pocket of her flannel blouse, where she had pinned two railway tickets and a book of traveler's checks Dode had bought for her.

"And by the time you and your dad get back," said Dode gently, "I'll be a free man, and we can—" He pointed away into the smoky blue wilderness of the upper Siskiyou. "We can—" Reaching over he grasped one of the girl's tiny brown hands in his calloused fist.

"Raise diamonds!" laughed Judy softly.

*Harbolt's big fist smashed Sheridan
on the side of the jaw.*



BULLETS MAKE A MAN

by I. L. THOMPSON

Too many beatings at the hands of the town's badmen, were beginning to weaken Neal Sheridan's lust for peace . . . until a bullet-branded gun-hawk showed him the way to powdersmoke redemption!

THE slim, red-haired young editor of Sundown's only newspaper faced the three killers tensely in the dimly lighted office of the Sundown Courier.

"And if I don't run the Courier the way you tell me to—what then?" he said evenly, his blue eyes blazing.

"Then Sundown will find itself without an editor," the tall, barrel-chested leader of the hard-bitten trio answered softly, his pale eyes looking Sheridan over from head to foot with studied insolence. "One of these days they'll find yore corpse hangin' from a cottonwood, or mebber sprawled over

yore stinkin' press. Better think it over, tenderfoot. Yuh've been in town a week. If yuh expect to stay, make up yore mind right now to see things our way."

Neal Sheridan's eyes smoldered, but he didn't say anything. He knew that Turk Harbolt was waiting for him to make some move which would give the outlaw an excuse to use the big black guns at his thighs. Somehow the tenderfoot knew, as he stared into Harbolt's cruel face, that the fact he himself was unarmed would make no difference to the outlaw and his shifty-eyed saddle mates.

Sheridan heard a quick, light footstep, knew that his wife, Mary, was standing in the doorway leading to the back room which served as their living quarters. He wished she hadn't heard what Turk Harbolt had just said, wished she didn't know that Turk Harbolt was the leader of a gang of rustlers and killers who ruled Apache Valley in open defiance of such forces of law and order as had so far been established on the untamed Frontier.

The outlaw, taking Sheridan's silence for admission of defeat, turned away with a dry chuckle. "C'mon boys. He's whipped."

Then, as though something in Sheridan's manner made him uncertain of the tenderfoot's true attitude, Harbolt swung around, strode back to the editor and grasped his shirt front at the throat. "This'll show yuh we mean business," he said through his teeth.

SHERIDAN guessed what was coming, but a queer paralysis numbed him as the knuckles of Harbolt's big fist smashed him on the side of the jaw. Staggering back, he crashed into the press, sprawled face downward on the floor. He got to his knees, shaking his head dazedly, hearing Mary's voice, choked with anger and fright. When his sight cleared he was on his feet, looking for Harbolt. But the outlaw and his two cronies were gone.

Mary's face was ghastly white. Mustering a smile, Sheridan patted her shoulders reassuringly. Hate for Harbolt and his gunmen raged through the tenderfoot so he could hardly speak. But the look on his wife's face frightened him, made him forget his anger. She had grown terribly thin during the past few days, he was thinking, and her oval face, normally gay and piquant, was drawn with fatigue. There was a good reason for that, Neal Sheridan knew. She was having a hard time of it taking care

of little Davy Sheridan, who had taken sick on the day they'd arrived in Sundown by stage coach. And now, worse even than that worn, tired look, was the unmasked terror in her dark eyes.

"Neal. Oh, Neal, those men won't stop at anything. Please do as they say. I couldn't stand it if anything were to happen—"

Mary Sheridan choked, hid her face against her husband's chest as he took her in his arms. "I—I wish we'd never come to this place. We don't belong here in this awful country where there's nothing but murder and violence. Let's go away."

The muscles along Neal Sheridan's thin jaw tightened, relaxed. "Don't, Mary," he said gently. "Turk Harbolt isn't going to hurt me. We'll find some way to beat him. You wouldn't want to run away, would you? We promised ourselves we'd pioneer the newspaper business in Sundown, make a success of it so that some day Davy would be proud of us. You're still game, aren't you, Mary?"

"Yes, but—"

Young Neal Sheridan kissed her cheerfully. "There's nothing to worry about," he said, trying hard to make his voice sound confident.

But the smile died from his lips as he stepped out into the star-lit night, walked aimlessly along the shadowed boardwalk. Bitterly he remembered the words of Buck Madsen, faro dealer at Kelley's Silver Spur and the only man who had taken time to befriend him since he had come to Sundown.

"Neal, if you got any ideas about cleaning up the town, forget about 'em. In the first place, remember that this ain't yore home town back East. Out here, gambling is a legitimate business, and you can't do anything about the honky-tonks. Of course, if you buck against Turk Harbolt and his gang, the decent citizens of Sundown will back you up. But remember, Sheriff Rucker is a damned jellyfish and won't raise a hand against the Harbolt crowd. It's all right to have ideals, to stand for law and order, kid, but you'll find out you'll have to back 'em up with a six-gun here in Apache Valley."

Buck Madsen was right. You had to back your ideas with a gun. And Sheridan didn't want that. He had never held a gun on a man in his life. Besides, even if the thought of killing a human being hadn't filled him with a sick horror, he would have no chance against these quick-trigger bad men. And

Neal Sheridan didn't want to die yet. He wanted to live, to take care of Mary and the boy.

Yes, and he wanted to build something proud and courageous out of the Sundown Courier. But how could he? Turk Harbolt had warned him. He was to soft-pedal the killings and other outrages perpetrated by the rustler gang, print only the versions approved by Harbolt.

Neal Sheridan's jaw set stubbornly. He clenched his hands. Well, he wouldn't do it, he told himself grimly. He wouldn't junk his ideals for any man, nor would he let a bunch of thick-skulled, butchering morons run him out of the country. The rustlers would find they couldn't bluff him out, tenderfoot though he was. He would buy a gun, then he would go straight to his friend, Buck Madsen, ask the gambler to teach him the secret of the lightning draw for which Buck was famous, teach him to shoot straight and true. A gun at his hip and a reputation for expert marksmanship. Maybe that would keep Harbolt's outfit at a distance.

THINGS were pretty quiet in Sundown during the following month, with only the usual disturbances common to Frontier towns occurring in the honky-tonks and gambling houses along main street. Young Neal Sheridan received no more sinister calls from the outlaws. Nevertheless, he lost no time in learning to handle his new six-gun. He had a natural aptitude which surprised Buck Madsen. Under the gambler's expert teaching, he became a dead shot, but somehow he couldn't seem to develop a swift, smooth draw.

"It's no use, Buck," he said repeatedly. "I can't do it."

"You'll get it all right," Buck Madsen reassured him. "Keep practicin'. Anyhow, you've learned the most important part of gun play, and that's to take yore time when you shoot. Most of these gunslicks, includin' myself, get flustered when they put too much lightnin' in their triggerin'. I've seen plumb famous gunhawks miss four out of five shots when they was facin' a slow, sure gent like you."

The peace which cloaked Sundown proved to be the calm before the storm. A murdered puncher sprawled in the mud at Cartwheel Springs, cattle rustled wholesale from Ridell's big Circle S outfit, threw Sundown into a turmoil. Indignant ranchers hinted that Turk Harbolt's gang was on the ram-

page again, talked of forming a vigilance committee.

"But they won't," Buck Madsen predicted. "Harbolt's got 'em buffaloed so they're afraid to talk above a whisper. I'll bet my bottom dollar most of them are the same gents who've been payin' tribute money to Harbolt and harborin' members of his gang when they was on the dodge."

Neal Sheridan printed scathing editorials directed at Sheriff Jay Rucker's obviously half-hearted efforts to trail the killers of the Circle S cowboy and retrieve the stolen stock. When the Overton-Sundown Stage was robbed of a shipment of gold intended for Kelley of the Silver Spur, Sheridan printed the dying assertion of Sandy Rudd, shotgun messenger, that Hall, Turk Harbolt's right-hand man, was one of the four road agents who pulled the job. Sandy Rudd swore, almost with his last breath, that Hall was the one who had shot him when he refused to throw down the strong box.

Grimly, Neal Sheridan plunged into the election fight that was just beginning, took his stand with the law-and-order element of Apache County, supporting Buck Madsen to replace Sheriff Rucker. The tenderfoot was making plenty of friends these days, and plenty of enemies.

Little Davy grew red-cheeked and husky. Mary Sheridan seemed happy as, more and more, Sundown's feminine society took her to its bosom. If she was terrified by the trend of events on Apache Range, she gave no sign. Her husband had chosen his course of action. Neal Sheridan knew his wife's loyalty, knew she would stand by him no matter what might come.

THE evening was clear and chill. Sundown hummed with suppressed excitement as men talked guardedly of the latest election news, of the next move that the outlaws might be expected to make.

Neal Sheridan strode through the batwings of Kelley's Silver Spur, nodded to acquaintances as he made his way to Buck Madsen's table. The editor's face lighted up as Buck Madsen glanced up, a fleeting smile lifting the corners of his wide mouth before he turned his attention back to the cards in his hand. Sheridan never took part in the games, but he liked to watch the tall, skilled gambler, liked to watch his supple fingers at work, his calm gray eyes studying the faces of the men at his table.

Sheridan was taken wholly by surprise

when a heavy hand fell on his shoulder, twirled him around. His face paled as he stared into the milky eyes of Turk Harbolt.

"Yuh've been tryin' tuh stir up trouble, Sheridan," Harbolt rumbled. "An' yo're goin' to get yore share right now. Yuh should've got proof before yuh accused a friend of mine of stickin' up the stage. Everybody knows that old fool Sandy Rudd was so drunk he couldn't have told a road agent from a jack rabbit."

Quick anger burned through Neal Sheridan at Harbolt's bluff. "That's a lie!" he flung out recklessly. "Harbolt, you've got a nerve, coming here when everybody knows you're a thief and murderer. If we had a sheriff with a backbone—"

Out of the corner of his eye Sheridan saw Buck Madsen scowl apprehensively, push his chair back.

"Shootin' off yore mouth again." Turk Harbolt's voice turned cold, brittle with rage. He stepped back two or three paces, and his hands swung close to the thonged holsters at his thighs. "Yuh've got a gun, you damned tenderfoot. Pull it an' start shootin'."

The challenge was like a dash of cold water in Sheridan's face. Somehow he had completely forgotten that here on the Frontier, angry words almost inevitably led to gun play. Now, as he stared at Harbolt's flat, merciless eyes, at the jutting butts of the outlaw's guns, his throat went horribly dry, and his arms felt numb. Harbolt would kill him, he knew. He had no chance before this gun hawk, veteran of more than a score of six-gun duels.

A tiny muscle began to twitch under Sheridan's eye. There was a lot of difference between target shooting and facing a human killer with blood-lust in his eyes. Suddenly Sheridan thought of Mary, of little Davy. What would become of them if he were killed? Even as the question flashed through his mind, he wondered if he were trying to explain the paralyzing fear which was coursing through him, trying to find an excuse for refusing to fight.

"You know I can't match your gun speed, Harbolt," he managed to say at last. "You know I haven't a Chinaman's chance, and that's why you're trying to force me into a showdown. I'm going to keep on fighting you in a different way, in the only way I know, with the Courier. I'll bring law to this county with it, run you and your murdering gang off the range."

There was a painful silence, then Harbolt

threw back his head and laughed until his heavy jowls quivered.

"The nerve of the white-livered little rabbit!" he said hoarsely, grinning triumphantly at the silent onlookers. "Says he'll run me out after he's run from a gun fight."

Abruptly, Harbolt's face twisted into an ugly sneer. "Yo're finished in Sundown, Sheridan. There ain't a gent in Apache County will read yore damned paper after tonight. Yo're yellow. That's one story you won't print, ain't it?"

Neal Sheridan caught a glimpse of Buck Madsen then, and the look on the gambler's face stung him like a whip. Misery was there, and something else. Shame, that was it. Shame for Neal Sheridan.

Harbolt strode forward deliberately, struck the tenderfoot editor across the mouth with his open hand. Sheridan, his face gray, lashed out at the outlaw with his fist. He had a supple, wiry strength which might have carried him far with another adversary, but which was wholly ineffectual against Harbolt.

THE outlaw clipped him hard on the side of the head, then whirled him aloft with huge, pile-driver arms, hurled him bodily against a table. Sheridan cried out involuntarily as he struck, heard a snapping noise as a rib cracked against the edge of the table. Fiery pain darted through his side. Then he was on the floor, sick, dizzy, and Harbolt was kicking him with his great booted feet.

He heard Buck Madsen's roar of rage. "Leave that kid alone, Harbolt, you damned bully!"

Then the outlaw. "Get outa the way, Madsen, I'm goin' to teach this pilgrim a lesson he won't forget."

"I've got a couple of forty-five caliber arguments which says you won't, Harbolt," the gambler said softly.

There was a brief silence, broken by Harbolt. "You win now, Madsen," he sneered. "But next time it'll be different. I'll be lookin' for yuh tomorrow, sundown, front of Kelley's."

"That suits me, Harbolt," Buck Madsen answered unemotionally. "I'll be there."

Sick despair held Sheridan as he got painfully to his feet, saw Turk Harbolt stride away. Only one thing stood out clear and sharp against the whirl of thoughts which confused his brain. He couldn't let Buck Madsen fight his battles for him.

He could hardly stand. He would have

fallen but for the support of Madsen's arm. The gambler drew Sheridan's arm over his shoulder, helped the dazed pilgrim through the batwings, along the rough boardwalk. Neither man spoke. Sheridan's shadowed face reflected an agony which had little to do with his cracked rib or the purple bruise on his head. He was seeing again that silent, stricken crowd at Kelley's. Men who had given him the handclasp of friendship, alienated from him by one unforgivable breach of their code.

In front of the Courier office Sheridan thanked Buck Madsen haltingly. "But you can't fight Harbolt tomorrow," he said. "I—I'll meet him myself."

"It's out of yore hands now, Neal," Buck Madsen said quietly. "It's my fight now. If I welshed, I wouldn't be able to show my face—"

He broke off, too late. "Don't take it too serious, what happened tonight, Neal," he said lamely. "After all, you can't be expected to—"

"To act like a man, is that it?" Sheridan finished bitterly.

"No that ain't it!" Madsen said sharply. "I was sayin' that you can't be expected to go against the bringin' up you had back home. Killin' ain't in yore line. I understand how you feel."

It hurt Sheridan to hear the tall gambler making excuses for him like that. He felt himself woefully unworthy of Buck Madsen's loyal friendship.

"I'm the one who will meet Harbolt tomorrow." There was somber finality in Neal Sheridan's voice, and a sinking feeling at the pit of his stomach.

Sleeplessness tortured him that night. He kept thinking of Buck Madsen's kindness. Buck had done his best to show the tenderfoot editor that the episode at Kelley's made no difference in their friendship. But Sheridan, remembering the look on the gambler's face during Harbolt's tongue-lashing, knew that Buck had been hard hit.

Somehow he would get to the outlaw first. Sheridan made no plans beyond that. There was no doubt in his mind regarding the outcome of the gunfight. He knew it would be sheer suicide, but that didn't matter now. He owed this to Buck Madsen. Yes, and owed it to Mary and the boy, too. A woman might excuse cowardice, but she hated it, nevertheless. And little Davy, someday his mother would tell him about his dad's fight with Harbolt, and maybe then the boy would be just a little bit proud

of the way his father had tried to square accounts.

Neal Sheridan sighed tiredly. For the first time in many hours he was at peace with himself. He was glad now that he had had the foresight to make arrangements for the financial security of his family in case of his death. It was a great comfort to know that Mary and Davy would be taken care of. Presently, as stars began to fade, Sheridan sank into a dreamless sleep.

AN EARLY afternoon sun beat down on the sprawled cow-town, glared whitely on the weathered front of the Courier office. Sheridan was helping Laynes, the wrinkled little oldster who assisted him with the Courier. The noise of the ancient press filled the room as the editor moved stiffly about his work, his face etched deep from the pain of his unbandaged side.

Davy Sheridan, bright-eyed and sturdy, trotted into the office, clambered to a table-top and sat among the copy papers his father had been editing. He leaned close, shouted in his dad's ear. "Mother won't let me go out and play, Dad. Why can't I, huh?"

"Because Turk Harbolt—"

The heavy roar of a six-gun bellowed above the noise of the press, to the accompaniment of breaking glass as a window-pane shattered. Neal Sheridan stared wildly, unbelievably at the gush of blood at Davy's hip, then, with a choking cry, he caught the sagging body of his son in his arms, ran into the back room.

They stopped the flow of blood, but Laynes shook his head grimly. "It's bad, Mister Sheridan. You got to get the doctor, quick as you can."

Sheridan, taking one look at the frozen horror on his wife's face, lunged outside, raced up the street. Seconds later he was back. "The doctor's gone," he pronounced through stiff lips. "He left this morning and isn't expected back before nightfall. His wife said I might find him at the Circle S ranch."

Snatching his hat from a wall peg, Sheridan bolted out the rear door, ran across the alley to Allen's Livery Stable and Corral. He wasn't a good rider, and the sight of the powerful sorrel that Lige Allen led out for him would have been disturbing under other circumstances. But now—Only the skilled hands of Doc Crawford could save Davy's life, and the only one who could bring back Doc Crawford was Neal Sheridan himself.

There was no time to send anybody else. Allen couldn't go. He was a cripple, invalidated long ago by a bucking bronc. And Laynes would be of more use here than anywhere else. Sheridan could see that by the efficient way Laynes had bandaged Davy's wound.

The sorrel had fire in its eye. On the third attempt, Sheridan managed to hit the saddle. The bronc had covered a quarter of a mile before his rider could get his right foot secure in the stirrup. Sheridan couldn't help but thrill to the great heart of the bronc as mile after mile slipped away behind. But as the minutes passed into an hour or more, his brain grew oblivious to all but one thing—the memory of Davy lying so white and still in his mother's arms. Sheridan groaned. He must get the doctor in time. Nothing else was so important as that, not even the debt he would pay at sundown to the accompaniment of spurring six-guns. Sheridan wondered grimly who had fired that cowardly shot. One of the outlaws, of course. Harbolt would do anything to be rid of opposition.

Neal Sheridan's fist tightened on the reins until the sorrel's head began to toss impatiently. Harbolt would pay for this. Pay plenty.

Doc Crawford wasn't at the Circle S, but Sheridan found him at a small ranch further down the valley. The old medico was just swinging into his saddle when Sheridan pounded up on the lathered sorrel.

"I'll slope back to town," Crawford rumbled after he heard Sheridan's story. "I've got two more calls to make, but they'll have to wait awhile."

Doc Crawford's long-limbed thoroughbred flashed down the dusty road like a red comet, soon outdistancing the tired sorrel.

For once, Sheridan took no joy in the smell of the clean, pungent prairie wind, nor in the rugged beauty of the hills which guarded the rich grazing lands of Apache Valley. He didn't even look up as he passed the Circle S, didn't see kindly Mrs. Ridell as she waved to him from the ranch house veranda. He just sat hunched in the saddle, the reins hanging loose in his fingers as his bronc slogged along.

He figured that he would be in town before sundown, would have time to see Davy again before he met Harbolt. Presently he urged the sorrel into a thundering gallop. He must take no chances on being late—

Sheridan saw a flutter of white, knew it

meant trouble even before the breeze picked the scrap of paper off the ground and sent it sailing across the sorrel's path. He grabbed for the saddle horn as the big bronc shied violently. There was a lurch and Sheridan suddenly felt suspended in midair, then the earth came up to meet him with a terrific jolt, and he was lying sprawled in the dust. The sorrel kept right on going.

SHERIDAN cursed, jumped up and ran after the bronc, but as the gap between horse and man widened, he slowed to a shambling walk. There was no use to turn back to the ranch and borrow a bronc. He was nearer town than to the Circle S, but that wasn't saying much. Sheridan clenched his hands, cursed the chance which had set him afoot on this God-forsaken stretch of road. Would he ever see his son alive again, or would Davy be gone when he got back to town?

And Buck Madsen. As the sun dipped below the barren, crumpled hills, Buck would face Harbolt's guns knowing that Neal Sheridan had failed him. He wouldn't know that Sheridan had tried his best to fulfill his promise, that though fear of Harbolt still gnawed at his vitals, he was ready to die rather than allow Buck Madsen to face killer-guns in his behalf.

The tenderfoot, his sunburned face streaming with sweat, broke into a run, kept it up until his legs buckled and he fell headlong. After that he went more slowly, his face grim, his eyes hopeless as he watched the sun arc down the sky toward the horizon.

With the dusk, Neal Sheridan came into the outskirts of Sundown. Main street was silent, empty except for a few racked ponies, a couple of merchants locking up for the night.

Mary ran out to meet him. "Neal," she cried. "Thank God you're safe! When that horse came back without you—"

"Davy!" Sheridan gasped. "Is he—?"

"The doctor says he's going to be all right."

It was Laynes who answered the rest of Sheridan's questions. "There wasn't no gunfight," the assistant said, frowning perplexedly. "There's somethin' queer about the whole business. Harbolt was in town, swaggerin' up and down in front of Kelley's, cursin' Buck Madsen for a coward. Buck didn't show--ain't been seen in town

today. I can't figger it, Mister Sheridan. Buck wouldn't back down on a gunfight. He ain't that kind."

Sheridan couldn't figure it either. He didn't try to, because his tired brain was playing tricks with his thinking.

Activity at Kelley's began early. The town swarmed with Harbolt men, with others who were backing Sheriff Rucker against the law-and-order element in Apache County. Sheridan, watching them ride in from all directions, knew there would be plenty of gun-trouble before the night was over. There always was when Harbolt's hard-drinking, hard-fighting mob hit town.

Sheridan spent three hours looking for Turk Harbolt, without success. Everywhere he went, men watched him with hard, hostile eyes, but beyond that they didn't molest him. He wondered at that. What were the outlaws waiting for? Turk Harbolt? Presently Sheridan went home, went wearily to bed.

The uproar at Kelley's increased. There seemed to be some sort of celebration in progress. Long after the rest of the town had gone to sleep, it continued raucously, abating only when dawn crept over the prairie.

NEAL SHERIDAN, still half-asleep, heard a commotion outside—the staccato roars of six-guns, scattered Apache war-whoops and the thunder of hoofs. Then, as he heard a swift knock, he jerked upright, groaned and got up stiffly, his face gray with the pain of his injured rib and the sore muscles all over his body.

Laynes, who occupied a cot in the office, was waiting for him at the door, his eyes bulged out with terror. "They're here!" he gasped. "Harbolt's gang, drunker than seven devils and loaded down with artillery. They'll kill us all."

Sheridan flung on his clothes, jerked his cartridge belt off a wall peg and snatched up a scattergun as he ran into the office. "Stay back, Mary!" he shouted over his shoulder.

Laynes, the pallor of fear stamped on his weathered face, was already barricading the door. Through the window Sheridan saw a group of horsemen dismount in front of the deserted Bandbox Theater across the street, saw Turk Harbolt urge his flashy pinto bronc close to the Courier office in a swirl of dust, rein to a sliding halt, a triumphant leer on his beefy face.

"We're goin' tuh bust up yore damned

press, Sheridan," the outlaw leader yelled. "C'mon out, or yuh might get hurt."

Sheridan poked the shotgun through a window pane. "You won't wreck my press, Harbolt," he said grimly. "Back up, or I'll shoot you out of the saddle."

Astonishment wiped the grin from Harbolt's face. He spurred the pinto across the street, dismounted and parleyed briefly with his men. Swiftly then, they scattered, three of them, with Harbolt, disappearing through the door of the Bandbox, the remaining five taking cover around the corners of the building. It wasn't long before Sheridan and Laynes saw signs of stealthy movement behind the false front of the theater.

Laynes ducked as a slug crashed into the room. "We ain't got a chance," he gasped. "Ain't there a back door in the other room, where we can get out?"

"Yes." Sheridan gripped Laynes' arm. "Listen, you take Mary and Davy, get them out through the back way."

Sheridan edged nearer the window, put down the shotgun and triggered carefully with his six-shooter. A rattle of gunfire sounded back of him and he heard a door slam violently. But just then a slug rocketed through the window, smashed along his skull. He saw blinding light, then a swift tide of black as dagger-points of pain struck at his head. A volley of bullets swarmed close, and Sheridan found himself crawling dazedly toward the back room, feeling deathly sick as he tried to peer through the sticky ooze which clouded his eyes.

He kept seeing the ugly, grinning face of Turk Harbolt behind a pair of smoking guns. He shivered as he remembered the animal cruelty in the gunman's milky eyes, and fear went through him in waves that were like nausea, making him shake all over.

"Neal, you're hurt!"

That voice shocked his brain back to clearness.

"Mary!" he said hoarsely. "Get out of here. You'll be killed!"

Then he saw her. She was holding the derringer Laynes had carried in a shoulder holster. Her face was white, determined as she dropped to her knees beside him, ripped a piece from her dress and bandaged the wound on his head.

"And leave you here to face them alone?" she flashed. "I wouldn't go with Laynes. Two of Harbolt's men were posted back of the Crystal Dance hall. They—they killed Laynes as he ran outside."

Shame burned through Sheridan as he stared up at her. He could see that she was terribly afraid, but she was ready to face death with him. And he—Sheridan cursed himself silently. This was the second time he had turned tail, tried to crawl away from the thunder of Harbolt's guns.

"I've bolted the door," the girl said breathlessly. "I'll go back and keep them from rushing in."

The gunmen across the street poured a fresh volley into the front wall of the building. Sheridan set his jaw, scrambled over to the window, just in time to see a lone figure emerge around a corner of the Bandbox, run toward him. Sheridan wasn't trembling now. A strange calm steadied his arm as he fired, and the man threw his hands up and dropped in the street.

THE tenderfoot's temples began to pound hotly, and a tingling exultation filled him. He fired again, as a sombrero showed above the false front of the theater, and the owner of the hat slid off the roof to sprawl inertly on the ground.

The outlaws were more cautious after that. Sheridan, in the lull which followed, crept along the floor out of range of the snipers and crawled into the back room to see if Mary and Davy were safe. Mary was peering through the curtains of the window.

"They haven't fired a shot since they killed Laynes," she whispered. "But they're watching the door."

Sheridan, pulling Mary aside, looked across the dusty alley that bounded the Courier building. Inside the dusky interior of the livery stable he saw a furtive movement, and as he watched, the gleaming muzzle of a shotgun slid out into sunlight. Sheridan pushed Mary back into a darkened corner. "Don't get near that window again," he warned.

Mary's dark eyes flew to where little Davy lay in his homemade crib. He was whimpering a little, awakened by the roar of gunfire. Sheridan's face darkened as he stared at his small son, and a savage hate blossomed in him, hate for the human wolves who threatened his home, the lives of his loved ones.

The tinkling of shattering glass and the whine of a bullet sent him bounding headlong into the office. Recklessly he emptied his six-shooter at the windows of the Bandbox. He heard a faint curse, then something hit him, sent him crashing to the

floor. Like a man in a dream, he groped to his knees. Methodically, conscious of burning pain, he tore off his shirt, ripped it into strips and bandaged the hole in his shoulder. His head was throbbing like a drum as he reloaded his six-shooter. Better take this thing slow, be calm.

But it was hopeless, he knew that. The odds were too great. And there was no help forthcoming unless some of Sundown's citizens formed a vigilance committee, as they had long threatened. Sheridan knew better than to expect aid from Sheriff Rucker. As a matter of fact, he now recalled, the sheriff and his deputies had thundered out of town at sunup yesterday on the pretense of trailing a road agent whose crime was three days old. Sheridan smiled contemptuously, and a longing gripped him, a wish that he could live to rid Apache County of its crooked sheriff.

Then, abruptly, determination replaced the longing. He would live to replace Rucker with an honest lawman. The Courier would be his weapon. Men of Sundown might hate him for the thing that had happened at Kelley's but he would finish the job he had started, clean up Apache County before he left it forever.

Two more of Harbolt's gunmen slid off the Bandbox roof to land in a heap beside the dead men on the ground, as Sheridan's six-shooter bellowed twice. Then the editor jerked convulsively, sagged against the wall as a slug ripped into his hip. In a fog, he managed to stanch the flow of blood. Warily then, he tried desperately to steady his aim as an overpowering weakness flooded through him.

In that moment, he dared to feel a sudden kinship with the men who had pioneered the West, fought to save their homes, their herds, first from savages, later from men like Harbolt and his outlaw pack. Now at last he began to understand the code such men lived by. No wonder they had repudiated him at Kelley's that night. Men who lived as dangerously, courageously as these couldn't be expected to understand, much less respect, the motives of a man who accepted passively the brand of coward, tenderfoot though he was.

The sun was beating down fiercely on the Courier office now, and its heat added to Sheridan's misery. Shaky and sick, streaming with sweat, he sent shot after shot crashing into the windows of the Bandbox. It was impossible to tell if his

shots had effect. There seemed to be no lessening of the steady fire from across the street.

SHERIDAN, fumbling for a fifth cartridge for his gun, dragged his swimming gaze down to the empty box. He knew the game was up now. There would be no more Courier, after all, and no more Neal Sheridan. Grimly he squared his jaw, and the light in his eyes gleamed bright. He would make these last shots count.

The chill voice of Turk Harbolt startled his reeling senses. An icy breath rippled along his spine as he realized that the outlaw leader had somehow managed to sneak across the street, was hidden somewhere close to the Courier office.

"Come outa there, Sheridan," the outlaw bellowed. "Or I'll fire the building. Come out alone, and yore family will be safe. Stay in and you'll all burn. Yore pal Madsen can't help yuh now. He's dead!"

Anguish gleamed in Sheridan's eyes. So that was it! They had killed Buck, bushwhacked him so Harbolt wouldn't have to face the gambler's gun-skill.

It wasn't a bluff, that threat to fire the building. Sheridan knew that. Maybe—maybe if he did as Harbolt ordered, Mary and Davy would be safe. Slowly, fighting the feverish dizziness which clutched him, the tenderfoot editor got to his feet, staggered to the door and pulled at the table Laynes had wedged against it. He was scarcely aware of his wife's arms about him, her terrified voice calling. "Neal, you can't go out there. I won't let you."

He pushed her into the back room, slammed the door. Then he was lurching out into the hot shadows of the boardwalk. Bullets ripped at him from the Bandbox, but he paid no heed, for at the corner of the Courier office stood two men. One was a dark, hawk-faced gent, and the other was Turk Harbolt. Sheridan raised his gun. He had to get Harbolt. He was sure now that there would be no safety for Mary and Davy so long as this kill-crazy devil was alive.

Dimly, he was conscious of gunfire behind him, but the whine of slugs past his ears ceased abruptly. The hawk-faced man triggered twice as Sheridan took careful aim. The tenderfoot took a slug in the thigh, then his own gun bucked, and the outlaw beside Turk Harbolt crumpled.

Harbolt's gun was roaring. A slug

smashed Sheridan in the chest, sent him reeling against the bullet-splintered wall. By sheer force of will he lifted his heavy gun, tried to line Harbolt in the wavering sights. The outlaw leader was stalking toward him, guns spurting. Sheridan, bracing himself against the wall, triggered at that evil, grinning face. Then he slumped down, a bloody froth creeping through his lips. He couldn't see Harbolt now. He couldn't see anything. Thoughts flashed through his brain, thoughts of Mary, of little Davy and of Buck Madsen.

Vaguely he heard footsteps, hushed voices. His fingers dropped away from his bloody gun and he lay still.

WHEN he opened his eyes he found himself staring at a familiar ceiling. He saw Mary Sheridan's head pressed against his shoulder, heard her desolate sobbing. Ringed about him were men he knew, men who had been his friends before that night at Kelley's. Two of them were supporting the weight of Buck Madsen, who was staring down at Sheridan with eyes that were suspiciously moist. "The doc's on his way," Buck said huskily.

"By damn," someone said hoarsely. "That was a fight."

There was a question in Sheridan's eyes. "Turk Harbolt?" he whispered faintly.

"You got him, partner," a soft-voiced rancher said reassuringly. "You killed six of the worst hombres that ever deviled Apache County, hombres that had the rest of us plumb gentled an' eatin' out of their hands."

"Yeah," a ruddy-faced cowhand offered sheepishly. "It took Buck Madsen tuh start this here vigilance committee a-rollin'. An' him laid up with a load o' buckshot that was a present from Harbolt hisself."

"Buck," someone muttered impatiently, "tell this here fightin' editor of ours how we feel about him."

"Neal," Buck Madsen said soberly. "The boys want you to know they're pullin' for you from now on. You got to live, partner. Apache County needs a gent like you to keep its wings clipped and its war-teeth pulled."

Sudden hope burned in Sheridan's eyes. He couldn't die. He must go on and finish his job. The Harbolt gang was laid low. These men—his friends were ready to back him. Swallowing the blood that rose to his lips, he smiled faintly, and Mary Sheridan, looking into his eyes, stopped crying.

GUN-BROTHER OF THE WILD BUNCH

by G. W. BARRINGTON

Out of the rustler-ruled rangeland, into the maw of Mesa Town's gun-greed and trigger-treachery came Blondy Summers . . . with the sign of the killer in his walk, and the magic of sudden death riding in the holster on his hip!

Preston dropped like a stricken beef when the puncher's six-gun bellowed angrily.



ONION JONES, bald, rubicund, perpetually perspiring proprietor of the Oasis, was versatile, ambidextrous and facile-minded.

Attesting which, witness that, late one afternoon, Onion was polishing a glass on his apron, whistling La Paloma tunelessly, reading the big Denver Weekly spread on the bar before him, and keeping a mental score of the four-handed pool game in progress on the combination table at the far end of the long, low ceiled garish room.

Having disciplined his eyes, ears, hands

and whistling apparatus to work independently, Onion was hitting efficiently on all cylinders with no lost motion anywhere, but had to give it up and concentrate when the creaking shutter door swung open, and Sheriff Harry Martindale shoved his saddle-stained person inside.

Stopping La Paloma right in the midst of an ascending trill that was his pride, brushing the paper aside, adding the glass to a glittering pyramid on the back bar, and letting the score of the pool game take care of itself for the time being, Onion pol-

ished his way to the rear end of the bar, then stood, rag in hand, one attentive ear cocked to catch the sheriff's order. As he did so, the shutter creaked again, and three of Martindale's deputies filed back to set jingling heels on the polished brass rail and nod their heads in silent endorsement when their chief spun a dollar on the bar and ordered straight rye.

Setting out the red-amber bar bottle, Onion slid a glass to the elbow of each of his patrons without moving out of his tracks, then commenced cracking ice for the chasers.

Knowing fagged and thirsty men when he saw them, Onion put on full steam, deftly spinning a glass of ice-water to the elbow of each, as the bottle was passed along the line.

Slapping ashy-looking dust off his corduroyed arms with his wide-cuffed buck gauntlets, the big, sandy-headed, open-faced sheriff noted the bustling proprietor's efficiency with open admiration.

"Some worker yourself, Onion," he applauded, then added, with a twinkle of amusement in his mild gray eyes, "Don't know but I'll have to fire this bunch, an' take you on."

Two of the sheriff's helpers, the Preston twins, were lank, freckled and fiery headed plains punchers serving only during the emergency which confronted the peace officer. These grinned sheepishly at his sly dig, and let it go at that.

The third, a regular deputy, was dark, middle aged, sober faced, heavy of body and slow of thought and motion. Failing to respond to his chief's badinage, the deputy eyed his drink glumly.

"Needn't kid us," he growled. "Can't see that you've rounded up any great big herd o' holdup artists yourself, in these last few weeks."

Martindale threw his big head back and his even teeth flashed white as he laughed uproariously.

"Stung!" he admitted. "Stung, an' fair enough, at that. Needn't look so ringy about it though, Hollis. I know you boys is all right. Just hurrahin' you a mite. C'mon, le's study our astronomy—looking at the sky through a glass. Here's hopin' we ketch that ranny!"

"Which we will," Hollis contributed, with stolid purposefulness, gripping his glass with thumb and all four fingers.

As the four crooked their elbows in uni-

son, Onion scratched his shining dome thoughtfully, and ventured a direct question.

"Rustlers workin'?"

"Worse'n that," Martindale answered gloomily. "Denver stage outa Hillview was held up in Grizzly Gulch on the down trip this mornin'. One lone waddy done it. Got a big haul at that—an even ten thousand all in big bills."

"Le's see," Onion considered. "Ol' Dick Wade is drivin' on that line, ain't he?"

"Was drivin'," Martindale corrected him suggestively. "Dick got foolish and went fur the sawed-off shot gun he had cached back of the cushion."

Onion pursed his thin lips and whistled in astonishment.

"Now look at that!" he grunted disgustedly. "Dick got gray as a rat drivin' that line, then had t' go an' make a bum play like that."

"Them fellers back there is all right," he added, dropping his voice as the sheriff turned his back to the bar, hooked a heel over the footrail and gave the four at the pool table a deliberate once over.

"That's the big trouble aroun' this country," Hollis cut in, setting down his glass and wiping the back of his hand across his mouth. "Ev'rybody 'roun' here's awright, still rustlin' an' stage holdups goes right on. Some o' these awright fellers is awwrong, if we only kin figger out which one it is."

"Well, it ain't none of them boys back there," Onion insisted. "Anyway, if that holdup was way over in the gulch, how come you fellers is prowlin' 'roun' in Mesa? What makes you think that ranny's at this crossroads?"

"Well, he ain't nowheres else," Martindale answered, grinning whimsically.

"Fact is, Onion," he continued, "this bein' the seventh straight holdup an' clean getaway in this county in six weeks, each a one man fiesta, I was pretty close behin' that ranny this time. Got the Denver line covered both ways, foothill trails, too. Only way fur him t' git out is through Mesa an' east over the prairie—an' me'n the boys is here, ready, t' pick up any strange maverick that strays—"

"As I was sayin'," Onion cut in, giving his shining dome an almost perceptible jerk toward the front and winking warningly, "as I was sayin', you kin have your suppers

sent in from the Dutchman's next door if you like. They's a table back there you kin use."

ONION turned to the cash register to ring up the sheriff's coin. As he waddled back with the change, he appeared to note for the first time that he had a new patron at the upper end of the bar.

Just inside the shutter, and with his back against it, a lean, withy looking young fellow stood, deliberately appraising the room and its occupants.

Open blue eyes, serious enough at the moment, but somehow conveying an impression of humor ready to rise, collaborated with the sunburst of curly amber hair to suggest the effeminate, an implication which the firm chin and resolute mouth valiantly denied.

In apparel the stranger presented another paradox.

The black silk shirt with flaring scarlet neckcloth caught with a silver loop, the picturated elkhide vest and heavily-studded hatband, holsters and leather cuffs, bespoke the prairie dandy. Disputing them flatly, the corduroy trousers, high-heeled boots and plain, wooden-buttled sixes looked capable enough.

Lolling with his back against the bar and elbows resting on it, one heel hooked over the rail, thumbs tucked beneath his belt, the sheriff eyed the newcomer aslant in a silence that grew oppressive.

Onion potted about the back bar. The twins politely curbed their surging curiosity and made pretense of cigarette making. Hollis fixed his somber, muddy eyes on the stranger and scowled thoughtfully.

One of the four at the pool table cuffed the balls about absently, the other three staring steadily toward the front.

Every cubic inch of air in the stale, dingy place was charged with dynamics, a situation to which the man at the shutter was not oblivious. Commencing with the sheriff, he made a quick inventory of every occupant of the room.

A little smile crinkled the corners of his mouth as he shot a keen appraising glance at Martindale. The twins were swept from head to foot with a look that was a mere flash, but appeared to fix their status definitely. Dour-browed Hollis came in for more attention, and Onion was similarly flattered.

The four at the pool table earned but one collective inspection, which, short as it was, gave the hovering bartender time to lean across the bar and whisper his verdict into the sheriff's ear.

"B-a-double-d, ba-a-ad," Onion assayed him.

By "bad" Onion didn't mean that the stranger was wicked or depraved, but only that he was a fighter from crown to sole.

Martindale nodded his big head in short affirmative, then shifted his position and gave his right holster a cuff to the front.

Slight as the motion was, it caught the newcomer's eye, as did the supporting move of Hollis, who eased away from the bar and tramped heavily to the wall opposite, a sagacious flank movement strictly in keeping with the subtle deputy's character.

The newcomer's reaction was as unique as it was instantaneous.

Smiling whimsically, he deserted the shutter, and with the typical cowboy roll in his gait walked straight down the bar, then around the end, and back along it to where Onion was standing. Turning his back to the astounded proprietor, the newcomer raised his gauntleted hands high and grinned over his shoulder as he drawled, "Well, peel me, Mister."

"Peel you?" Onion sputtered. "Why what the— Say, I ain't no valley! If you wanta shed 'em, just shuck 'em off, yourself!"

"'Fraid to," the newcomer admitted, his grin broadening as he jerked his blond head toward those in front of the bar. "Them gazabos out there is so plumb nervous lookin' that I dassent poke a hand towards my belt fur fear they'll fall over in a fit an' mess this place all up. What's the matter 'ith me, anyway?" he inquired, dropping his head to look his trim figure over solicitously. "Pants tore, or somethin'?"

"Look like you're assembled plumb proper," Onion remarked, judgmatically, then added with proper asperity at thought that the sacred precincts of the back bar were being flagrantly invaded. "You may stay assembled, too—if you quit this monkey-foolin' and g't t' hell outa here! Otherwise, I ain't guaranteein' nothin'."

The blond young puncher shook his head in seeming uneasiness and looked at Martindale, who had revolved slowly to keep his eye on the newcomer as the latter left the door for the back bar.

"You big feller, with the tinware on your suspenders," the stranger drawled. "Reck-on you could stand the tremendous strain if I dropped my hands t' unhook this belt?"

Martindale flushed hotly, then his easy good nature asserted itself. "Come 'roun' in front, Mister," he invited. "We was about t' take our first dose o' medicine. Git your belly t' the mahogany an' tell the man what."

Watching slant-eyed, Onion saw the puncher make quick inventory of the four recently drained glasses, and smiled comprehendingly as he lowered his long arms and unhooked his belt.

"Safety first," he explained, as he started around the bar, handing the belt and guns to Onion as he passed. "You fellers may be amicable-minded, but you don't looks it. If you plug me you will do it knowin' that I'm plumb afoot."

"K-double-e-n ke-e-en," Onion muttered to himself as he hustled glasses for the five. "He saw even how much ice was melted in them chaser glasses, an' knowed Martindale lied when he said they hadn't drunk none fur a long spell. K-double-e-n, keen, an' plumb bad! Next thing is—what fur?"

The newcomer lifted his glass last, drained it slowly after the others had set down their empties.

Then he leaned a withy shoulder on the bar and started a sinewy hand toward his hip pocket moving it in a wide, slow circle as he drawled, "Don't nobody git nervous when I make this gesture. Just goin' fur the makin's."

Martindale and the twins grinned sheepishly, but, sulking at the stranger's other elbow, gloomy browed Hollis growled, "Nobody's a cussed bit afraid of you, Mister, an—"

"So-o-o?" the puncher cut in, raising his brows in guileless surprise. "Waal, in that case, what fur did you shuffle over there t' the wall an' squeeze the rivets outa them smokesticks a bit ago? Do that ev'ry time a gent drops in here fur a little lifesaver, eh?"

THE flush on the deputy's dark heavy face deepened, but open-dealing Martindale took the conversation away from him.

"We was stallin' you all right," he admitted frankly. "Fact is, they was a hold-up over in the hills this mornin', an' some-

wheres twixt there an' here is the gent that done it. It's got t' come out this way. No chance a-tall t' git a hawse out anywheres else. Got the hill trails all plugged. By the way, Mister, which way you ridin'?"

The puncher continued blowing a recalcitrant oblong of rice paper loose from his packet, then commenced sifting granulated tobacco into it, as he answered, "East."

A heavy silence greeted the admission.

The twins shuffled their feet in embarrassment. Onion coughed high in his throat as a nervous man does when the tension tightens. Hollis scowled blacker than ever, and even Martindale looked grave as he shot a more direct question.

"An' whereabouts from?"

"Cheyenne, by way of Denver," the stranger answered, then stuck the finished cigarette on his lip and hoisted a muscular leg to scratch a match.

There was another heavy silence while the young puncher cupped both hands over the blazing bit of wood, the habit of one accustomed to the open, squinting one eye to fend off the heat as he turned the other on Hollis.

"Well, somebody say it," he drawled, finally straightening and flipping the match over his shoulder with a snap of his thumb.

"Awright," Martindale said, motioning Hollis to be quiet. "I'll ask right in meetin'. Just where'd you bunk last night?"

"Empty cabin on Topknot Hill," the puncher answered readily. "Furthermore I'm headed fur North Platte, where I ride fur the Cody outfit—when I ain't somewhere else. Name's Billy Summers, commonly knowed as Blondy. My ma's a Methodist, an' dad votes the Republican ticket, most usual, an' I snore some when I'm tried. Further information on demand."

"She's demanded," Martindale announced promptly. "What I wanta know is, who'd you see goin' t' Topknot or comin' away from there? In other words, layin' my cards right down, I'm doubtin' that you rid all the way from there t'day 'thout us ketchin' sight of you some—bein' as we put in the day twixt there an' here."

Blondy considered the question for some time, then went to the rear of the room and sat down with his back in a corner. Tilting his spurred heels to the table-top, he hailed those up front.

"Come an' ride herd on me," he invited them. "I ain't gonna answer no more questions, none whatever."

"Ride herd is right," Martindale growled

peevishly. "Go watch 'im, Hollis. Don't take no chances. If he makes a crooked play, shoot 'im in two. Now keep your eye peeled an—"

"But wouldn't it be better t' find out whether he told the truth or not, 'fore you close-pen 'im that-a-way?" asked a mild voice from the upper end of the room.

Unnoticed the shutter had swung again, and just inside stood a little iron-gray man with long, drooping mustaches and bushy black brows, frosted at the tips.

A vest and trousers of butternut jeans, with battered felt hat that matched their color, flaming new sleeve-garters and hob-nailed boots bespoke the miner or prospector.

THE plain wooden butts of a pair of old style sixes protruded from the worn holsters which swung on a broad heavy belt, carrying a double row of cartridges.

Over one arm was thrown a long-skirted frock coat which matched the pants and vest.

The rock-hard face matched with the rest of him—rugged, furrowed, leathery, with a slightly beaked nose and sharply protruding chin. The eyes were shoe-black, piercing, never at rest.

"As I was sayin'," the latest comer remarked, as he strode up to the bar with the firm, brisk step that one would expect of him, "if that puncher says he bunked over on Topknot, an' you say he didn't bunk over on Topknot, why don't you just up an' find out who's right? They's a telephone up at the Silverton mine, on the hill next t' Topknot. Why don't you just call 'em up an' git the straight of it?"

"Aw, let 'em dream, stranger," Blondy's drawl floated from the rear of the room. "Never mind me. Better look out fur yourself. Them man-ropers 'll be havin' you hawgtied in a minute or so."

"Like hell they will," the little iron-gray man announced indifferently. "Well, what you gonna say?" he inquired, turning to Martindale.

"Reckon you're right," the fair-minded sheriff admitted. "Course I can't see how he got down here 'thout runnin' over us, if he did come from Topknot way. Howsomever, we kin phone an' see if anyone built a fire out there last night. If they did, it musta been him. Central's over at the stage office. I'll just lope over there an' call 'em up."

"Drinkin' first?" the newcomer inquired,

shifting his coat to the other arm and appropriating the bar bottle, then looking expectantly at Onion, who trotted to bring glasses.

Having imbibed a lonesome draft, the others not being a-thirst, the stranger jerked the end off a cheroot with his even front teeth, lighted a match on the end of his notched thumbnail, and puffed furiously as he leaned his straight back against the wall and watched the revival of the pool game.

Fifteen minutes brought Martindale, mystified, but apologetic.

While the twins looked their disappointment and Hollis growled protests beneath his breath, the sheriff admitted that he had been hasty and apologized fulsomely.

Yes, he'd got Ed Holcomb, the mine manager on the wire, and it was a lucky thing at that. Ed had seen a fire on Topknot on the previous evening. It was an unusual place to camp, so Ed had looked over there again in the morning, and saw the geezer's breakfast fire, just before sun-up.

"That settles it, pardner," the sheriff wound up his tale. "No chancet fur a feller t' git a hawse down from there in time t' shag over into the gulch an' hold ol' Dick up. You're plumb loose on this range, so git your belt an' buckle 'er on. Furthermore, everybody step up an' have one 'ith me, an' no hard feelin's."

"Shake," invited the iron-gray man, shifting the coat again to extend a lean hand and pump the sheriff's arm energetically. "Name's Benson—John Benson. Live down Fort Sidney way. Maybe you've heard of me?"

Martindale shook his head dubiously.

"Maybe have. I'm a poor hand at rememberin' names. Well, le's liquor up. We got t' be ridin'. Comin' almost sundown, an' somewheres twixt here an' them hills is a waddy that's grabbed off ten thousand, and nicked ol' Dick Wade.

"He's just nachully bound t' be in there, 'cause he ain't passed here. If he won't come out, we got t' shag in there an' roust 'im. Beats hell, though, that—Gor awmighty, what's comin' next?"

The shutter again.

Not inside this time, but just without, and holding the door open with one hand, stood a slender, dark-haired girl in a blue-flannel shirt, chic corduroy skirt, flat-brimmed gray hat and trim riding boots,

who beckoned with her free hand and called, "Oh, Daddy!"

AS BENSON'S erect figure left the bar to stride briskly across the sawdust-littered floor to the front in answer to her summons, Hollis eased to the sheriff's elbow and whispered, "How 'bout him? Where you reckon he dropped from?"

Martindale started at the abrupt question, then eyed Benson's trim back aslant as the latter stood in the doorway, engaged in low-voiced conversation with his daughter.

Beyond them a saddled pinto and a fat, black packhorse laden with camp dunnage, stood at the edge of the walk. Both were droopy-eared and dust-caked from hard travel.

"Hu-u-m!" Martindale grunted, scratching his big head dubiously at sight of the tired horses. "Maybe you're right, Hollis, but—"

"Awright, hon. Be with you in a minute," Benson said in a louder tone as he swung the shutter to and turned back to the bar. Outside they heard the jingle of the girl's spurs and the light tap of her heels across the walk as she stepped to the edge of the wide wooden awning where the horses stood.

"Got t' ride," Benson announced laconically, then jerked the cheroot from his mouth with one hand and raised his neglected drink with the other.

As he set down the glass and brushed the drooping mustaches two ways to make room for the cheroot, Hollis nudged Martindale, and the big sheriff asked, a little diffidently, "Ridin' which way, Mister?"

Again that heavy silence, a silence that seemed to shriek aloud. In the act of re-lighting the expired cheroot, Benson snapped his head slightly toward his questioner and bored him with his restless sloe eyes as he continued to puff at the obstinate weed.

Having regained his belt, Blondy strolled to the rear of the men knotted at the bar.

After starting the cheroot to glowing, Benson shifted his eyes from the sheriff to Hollis, then snarled unexpectedly, "None of your damn' business!"

With the words the Oasis snapped from tense expectancy to roiled activity.

Onion dropped his rag with ludicrous suddenness, slapped both hands palms down on the bar, and stood like a mute motionless emblem of neutrality, only his worried eyes moving in futile attempt to keep up

with the kaleidoscopic shifting of positions by every man in the room.

Back by the pool table, four cues struck the floor almost in unison as the players dropped them to claw at their hips, only to pause in the act and face about obediently as, behind them, Blondy's voice sounded cold and hard and crackling like ice breaking in a swollen river.

"Hands off them guns! Steady, now! Face around t' the wall, an' pet it some with your fingers!"

Simultaneously, Martindale and the Preston twins swung around in time to see Hollis lumbering to his former position at the wall, revolving slowly there, just in time to feel his ribs prodded by a gun in the gnarled hand of Benson, who had taken three cat-like backward steps.

Jerking the deputy around on his heel, the iron-gray man grew a second gun miraculously in his free hand and poked its frowning black muzzle over Hollis' shoulder straight at the sheriff's broad chest.

"Easy as is!" Benson snapped, his sloe eyes appearing to cover every part of the room. "Don't nobody git the arm-wiggles till I say when!"

MEANWHILE, the shutter had slammed open so hard that it banged against the battered cigar case, and the girl appeared on the threshold again, this time holding at a business-like level a sawed-off shotgun, strategically located to rake the bar from end to end.

Every inch a finer model of her rugged sire, the girl squinted a calculating brown eye along the dull, blue-steel barrel, fairly radiating firm determination and alert readiness.

"Now then, you sheriff feller!"

Benson's fuming cheroot gyrated rapidly in a corner of his mouth as he spoke.

Bewildered Martindale, slow-thoughted and slow-moving under any circumstances, jerked out of a daze and ran his tongue along the edge of a dry lip, then gulped, "Well?"

"Turn aroun' an' lay your hands on the bar! You other jaspers, too! That's right an' plumb sensible. Steady, now! Hey, Barkeep!"

"Who, me?" Onion sputtered. "Say, pardner, I'm declarin' absolute neutrality, now an' hereafter. I ain't lost no stage-robbers nor no cattle rustlers nor no sheriffs. All I want is—"

"Uh-huh, I understand," Benson cut in, spitting out the frazzled stogie without moving his head. "However, circumstances sometimes rises in which a feller hasta do as he's told, whether he likes it or not. This is one of them times. Now you ramble out here in front an' peel the belts off them' jaspers."

In the doorway the girl shifted the shotgun to keep pace with the sweating bartender's fumbling movements, always having it frowning at the man whose belt he was unbuckling as he disarmed the three at the bar.

As Onion removed the belt from the second Preston twin and tossed it behind the bar, Hollis suddenly heaved back with all the strength of his sturdy legs, jamming Benson tightly against the wall behind them. With a motion he dragged out a gun and started to jam it underneath his own shoulder.

As the gun flashed around in a short arc, destined for the straining body of Benson, a shot crashed out from the rear of the room, followed by a curse from Hollis and the chug of his gun on the floor, then by Blondy's even drawl, "Don't nobody go an' get excited none. One gazabo went an' played outa his turn, an' I had t' amputate his gun. Next jasper makes a bobble may not be so lucky. Hey, Boss! Ramble on back here an' shuck these waddies, so they won't feel plumb neglected!"

PERSPIRING copiously and stepping gingerly, Onion disarmed the pool players, then cuffed sweat off his dripping forehead and planted himself by the refrigerator, where he stood shuffling uneasily while Blondy and Benson ranged the room's occupants against the back wall.

"Program?" Blondy inquired of Benson, smiling as he looked past that fiery-eyed old warrior to where the girl still stood keeping the unwavering shotgun at a level.

"Get away!" Benson barked back laconically.

"Awright, you an' her start ridin'. I'll foller when you got a good lead. She better leave me that shotgun, though. Looks kinda miscellaneous actin', if you git what I mean."

"Goin'," Benson acquiesced, starting out promptly.

At the door he turned to bore the sheriff through with the sloe eyes, then shifted them to where Hollis stood glowering and gripping his numbed wrist.

"Good evenin', gentlemen," Benson addressed them suavely, then clumped over the walk and across the dun, hoof-cupped street to untie his roachmaned roan gelding from the hitchrack on the opposite side of the street.

Swinging into saddle, he loped back to look inquiringly at his daughter, who still stood dominating the situation with the sawed-off gun.

"Ready!" Benson announced crisply, after giving the pack-horses' tie-rope a half hitch around his saddle horn.

"Just a minute!" Blondy called from inside, then tramped back to lock the rear door and throw the key into the street ahead of him as he reappeared in the doorway, then crossed to get his rangy silver-trimmed dun gelding from the rack.

"Preparedness," he remarked, as he dropped the rein at the edge of the walk, then reached for the shotgun.

"Ready!" Benson announced again, as his daughter released her hold on the piece.

"Ride!" she answered laconically, then seated herself on the edge of the walk, crossed a booted calf over her knee and gazed abstractedly to where a dying sun was tinting the western hills with orange and purple and lavender.

"C'mon!" Benson ordered authoritatively, thrusting out his firm chin.

"No," she answered, tilting up a finer replica of that chin rebelliously.

"You'll need a start. My bronc is fresher than yours, and old Nig will break no speed records carrying that pack. Ride!"

"Le's go," Blondy called, a little uneasily, without looking around. "I can close-herd this bunch from now till fall round-up time, but they's no tellin' when some other geezer'll come ramblin' in an' maybe act discommodin'."

"Co'mon, Bess," Benson pleaded, changing tactics in the face of mutiny.

"Ride, Daddy," the girl replied with finality.

Benson looked her over dubiously, shook his shaggy head, then flicked the packhorse lightly with his quirt and jogged off up Main Street to northward, without looking back.

After her father had gone a hundred yards, the girl rose and walked to where Blondy stood watching over the shutter.

"Your horse fast?" she inquired.

"Plenty."

"Good! We'll give Daddy ten or fifteen minutes, then I'll cut all their broncs loose

and go. All we want is to get into the hard land over north-east by nightfall. They'll never catch up with us."

"Uh-huh," Blondy acquiesced. "Well, Miss, just shuffle along when you're ready an' never mind me. That hawse o' mine kin—hey, you geezer in the red shirt, keep huggin' that wall—kin make 'em hustle t' see my dust 'fore it gits settled."

The ticking of the grimy faced wall clock above the long, specked mirror back of the bar dominated the sordid room as the minutes passed.

Now and then a bootheel scraped and a spur jingled as someone inside shifted position gingerly.

GOING northward at a brisk jog, Benson and the packhorse rolled up a cloud of dun dust which changed to a murky gray as the dusk came on fast and distance shaded them.

Back in the town, down Main Street to southward and across it, Old Martin, keeper of the stage barn, came to the edge of the walk in front of his place, and looked curiously at the girl before the saloon.

After observing her for a time, Blondy being hidden from view in the doorway, he started toward the Oasis, but stopped when two punchers turned the corner of the barn and hailed him.

As the three came together and looked and pointed in her direction, the girl leaned carelessly against an awning post and made Blondy aware of the situation.

"How's your father makin' it?" he inquired.

"Fine! He's just turning east at the fork of the trail—a mile to the good, or more."

"Awright! Climb that pinto an' we'll make a run for it! Too bad they didn't give us more time—"

"They're going inside!" she called guardedly.

"Bully!" he applauded. "Soon's they git outa sight, cut all them broncs loose from the rack, an' we'll leave."

Watching alertly over the shutter, Blondy heard the girl leave the walk after a little time. Seconds later, a bronc trotted off down the street, then another and another.

Then someone hailed them by the barn, and the girl spoke from the edge of the walk.

"All ready! Hurry! They're coming!"

Backing quickly to the street, still keep-

ing the gun bearing over the shutter, Blondy caught the rein she handed him and swung easily up.

"Now shake that bronc some, Miss," he ordered.

As the pinto's gouging hoofs spooned up brown sand from the rutted street, Blondy whirled the dun around with his knees and brought the shotgun to bear on the three racing toward him from the barn, smiling as he noted that they had not waited to get out their mounts.

Immediately all three ducked into the nearest sheltering doorway, and from it a six-gun barked spitefully, and a bullet hummed past the peaked crown of Blondy's wide-brimmed white hat.

Bellowing a prompt answer, the shotgun raked the front of their shelter, the heavy charge of buckshot riving out the wood splinters and sending fragments of broken glass tinkling to the floor inside. A moment later the dun was racing in the wake of the galloping pinto, while the sagged walk in front of the Oasis swayed beneath the pounding feet of the released prisoners.

For a time indignant Mesa boiled turbulently, milled purposelessly, then spewed out hot pursuit.

Having rushed to the open unarmed, those at the saloon chugged back inside to retrieve their guns from back of the bar, ramming against each other in their haste, volleying a medley of wild threats and wilder suggestions.

Slow of thought and motion, Martindale got the wrong belt and had to exchange with a lank puncher. Straightened out at last, he led his gang outside, where he found one of the three newcomers emerging from the barn with a string of mounts, while the other two were catching loose horses in the street.

Hat off, sandy hair abristle with excitement, his heavy face ablaze with hot anger, Martindale mounted, leaned over the pommel and spurred desperately in the direction of two scurrying dust clouds just changing their course from north to east in the hazy distance.

"Ride, buckaroos!" he bellowed as all about him men leaped into saddle. "A hundred out of my pocket for any one of them three, dead or alive!"

"Mine'll be delivered dead!" bawled Hollis as he spurred up alongside, then passed his chief and went raging on.

THAT tradition of the sailors, "a stern chase is a long chase," holds as true on land as on water.

Moving six feet to the racing pinto's five, Blondy's rangy dun inched his bobbing muzzle to the girl's stirrup after she had covered a mile; they had reached the fork of the trail.

Pounding eastward for another mile, they overhauled Benson, who had slackened the packhorse's tie-rope and was hazing the burdened animal along ahead of him.

Like Blondy and the girl, the sheriff's party had closed up on the leader to some extent.

Another mile ahead over the sandy plain broken buttes loomed like brown monuments in the gathering dusk—the hard-rock country which joined hills to plain and which offered hundreds of crisscrossed trails the labyrinths of which spelled safety.

Leaning his weight on one stirrup to snap a menacing quirt over the tired packhorse's sweat-streaked rump, Benson greeted them as they drew alongside on the hoof-packed trail.

"Put it over, eh? Hurt any of 'em?"

"Nothin' but their tender feelin's," Blondy drawled, grinning widely. "That sheriff feller's so hoppin' mad he's bitin' his own neck. An' Hollis—well, if we live till mornin', he'll die in despair. That black hawse's kinda wore out, ain't he?"

"Plenty much. Doubt if he kin make it t' them buttes in time fur us t' pick us a canyon 'fore they see us go into it."

"Oh, maybe he will," Blondy answered, optimistically, then reined the dun to allow the girl to take her place beside her father. As she drew past, he handed her the shotgun, then drew a scarred-butted rifle from its scabbard at his saddleskirts.

Alert, Benson sensed the movement and twisted about in saddle to nod grim approval.

"Hold 'em one minute at the edge of them buttes, an' we'll make it. Wust come t' wust, we kin turn that packer loose, an'—"

"Wust ain't come yit," Blondy cut in, raising his voice as he dropped slowly back toward the yammering pack behind. "You might just keep punchin' that black web-foot some industrious an' pay no mind if you hear a ruckus!"

"Much obliged, stranger, if I never see you again," Benson called, then spurred to the black's straining flanks and hazed him off the trail and into the narrow, dark open-

ing between two friendly boulders just as the rattle of pistol fire sounded in the ruck behind.

WHIRLING the dun crosswise of the trail, Blondy raised the scarred-butted rifle and fired into the brown of them.

First huddling as all undisciplined men do instinctively when attacked, then fanning out as reason asserted itself, the sheriff's force formed into a wavering semi-circle, and advanced toward the buttes, keeping up a rolling pistol fire which sent a hail of hissing pellets singing into the little canyon, ricocheting off rocks, chugging into the sandy floor, doing everything except what the marksmen intended, the reason being that sagacious Blondy, afoot now, and with the darkness of the canyon in his favor, kept shifting his position, astutely and unexpectedly.

Breaking out of the pack, one horseman bore recklessly down the white trail, standing up in stirrups to fire steadily as he charged.

"That'll be Hollis," Blondy decided, then raised the rifle and squinted calculatingly.

With the bellow of the piece, the horse reared high, came down with all four feet nested, then toppled over on his side, threshed his legs spasmodically, and lay still.

Working his feet free, the rider took refuge behind the fallen animal and renewed his fire.

"Don't suit me," Blondy grunted, noting scurrying men afoot about to outflank him on either side. "Reckon them folks has had that precious minute an' a little more, so maybe I'd best go somewheres."

"I think you're right," came a quiet voice from behind him, and the young puncher whirled in surprise to see the girl leading the little pinto from behind a neighboring boulder.

"Thought—thought you'd gone!" he sputtered as she eased into her saddle.

"Not gone, but going," she answered evenly. "They'll never catch Daddy now, so we'd best travel while we can."

"Reckon you said something that time, Miss," Blondy answered, highheeling it through the sand toward the eager dun. "I like company, but them sociable-minded jaspers suits me too well. If you know where we're goin', shake that bronc an' le's fan it outa here!"

Winding her way surely through veined

passageways which offered their pursuers a hundred guesses as to which course they had taken, the girl gave the little pinto his head, while Blondy held the dun at her saddleskirts, grinning in the darkness as he heard futile yelling and shooting growing dimmer and dimmer as their mounts raced steadily through the sand.

After fifteen minutes the pinto's hoofs, then the dun's, rang on rock. Then they breasted a sharp ridge and the girl turned to the left along it, at the same time checking her jaded mount to a walk.

"Ain't turned around, are you?" Blondy inquired casually.

"No. We're doubling back on them. Daddy must be only a little way on ahead now. Hard trails lead every way from this hogback. That's the beauty of it. I know which way he'll go, but those fellows back there never will guess."

After another quarter of a mile covered at a walk, she reined in where the ridge sloped down to another section of nested boulders traversed by rock-floored passages which forbade trailing.

"Thanks, stranger," she said, leaning over to extend a gauntleted hand. "You can go any which way from here without leaving sign."

Inching the dun to sociable proximity to the pinto, Blondy hooked a leg over the horn and swung his foot idly, ignoring her proffered hand.

"Nice evenin', ain't it?" he remarked casually.

"It is," she answered, with a little ripple of laughter; then a moment later, "Well, if you won't shake hands, good-by and good luck. I'm waiting for you to start."

"Ladies first," Blondy answered, sweeping off his hat to bow low over the saddlehorn. "After you've choosed your path, I'll choose mine. Fair enough, eh?"

"It certainly is," she admitted.

"Awright, she's a bargain, an' no backin' out. Shake hearty!"

The girl extended her hand again and after a time worked it free from his clasp.

"We may see you again, some time," she said as she turned her mount sharply down a little declivity at the foot of which a tumbling brook from the foothills to westward brawled toward the plain.

"Reckon so," he answered from the crest of the ridge.

Conning her pony into the rushing stream, then along its pebbly floor for a

quarter of a mile, the girl left it for the rocky bed of a dry wash, and started to breast the steep side of another and higher ridge to westward.

The moment her mount's scrambling hoofs left the gravel for the harder surface of the wash, the girl checked him abruptly and turned in surprise.

Back of the pinto the dun and his rider showed a darker splotch on the murky trail.

"This is not fair," she rebuked him as he drew alongside, again. "I was to select my way, you yours."

"Correct, Sis. Go t' the head of the class," he answered, impudently. "I waited for you to choose your trail so's I could choose the same one. Not wishin' t' keep anything back from you, I'm remarkin' now that I'm gonna do that fur the rest of my life. Fine evenin', ain't it?"

There was a short silence, then the pert little pinto fished for the bit and plodded ahead unchecked.

Reaching the crest of the ridge, the girl reined in again and pointed to a narrow defile that separated it from another of its kind, still to westward.

"The trail up that valley leads straight to trouble," she said slowly and impressively, "trouble with which you have no concern and in which you ought not to allow yourself to become involved."

"Fine evenin', ain't it?" he remarked again, crowding the dun past her and taking the lead.

Throwing up her hand in a little gesture of helplessness, the girl followed without a word.

Fifteen minutes later, Benson hailed on ahead, and in another hour the three of them unsaddled in the heart of a cluster of huge rocks, where they made camp in complete safety, and with an abundance of wood and water at hand.

Much to Blondy's surprise, Benson made no comment on his presence, probably because he shrewdly suspected from the outset that Blondy would be hard to shake off.

UNDER an overhanging rock a fire was built. By the time the menfolk had tethered the tired horses, erected a pup tent for the girl and spread down their tarps and blankets, she had fried bacon, made coffee, warmed canned vegetables, which, with crackers in lieu of bread, provided a meal which the three devoured with proper gusto and no uneasiness, they being con-

fident that the sheriff's gang would be unable to unravel the trail they had laid.

Having supped, Benson bullied his daughter off to bed, he and Blondy washing the dishes and tidying up the camp for the night.

That done, Benson produced a cheroot, Blondy started his pipe into a comfortable glow, and for the first time reference was made to Blondy's unceremonious attachment to the Benson outfit.

Seated crosslegged by the fire, Benson lighted the cheroot with a twig which carried a ruddy coal at one end, squinting past it at the puncher as he remarked, "You're plumb welcome here t'night, Mister—er—Summers, I believe I heard you call it."

"Yes, Billy Summers—make it Blondy fur short."

"All right, Blondy. I wasn't what you might call plumb overcome with surprise when you stuck on with us tonight. Reckon you didn't know where else t' go, fur the time bein', maybe not knowin' yur way through them buttes in the dark. Come daylight, I'll steer you outa here an' send you on your way."

Lying on his back with his hands crossed behind his head and pipe glowing comfortably, Blondy saw the tent flaps part ever so slightly and a pert nose show in the flickering fireglow as he drawled, "Bound t' git rid of me, eh?"

"Yes, if you wanta put it that way. I don't want t' git you tangled with the law."

"Well, it'll be plumb easy fur you t' git shut of me. All you'll hafta do is t' shoot me."

Blondy grinned again as he saw the nose disappear behind the closing walls, while across the fire Benson bored him with the restless slow yes, started to make hot retort, then smiled in surrender as he remarked, "Well, anyway, you're here to-night, just 'cause you're here, so we'll pass that fur right now."

After Benson had consumed his second cheroot by burning it at one end and chewing it to a frazzle at the other, he rose, yawned and stretched sleepily, then went to his tarp.

"Gittin' late fur a old buck t' be up. Reckon we'd as well turn in," he suggested, then peeled coat and vest and sat down to remove his boots.

"Didn't sleep well last night," he added, wrestling with his second boot. "Too

durned dusty an' windy where we camped up there on Topknot."

THE little campfire under the overhanging ledge in the close-walled valley still held ruddy coals beneath their gray-ash covering when Benson raked it open hours before sunrise next morning.

Fifteen minutes later, roused by movements about camp, Blondy crawled from beneath his blankets to find the girl brewing coffee in the chill morning air, while Benson already had struck her tent and was busy rolling it into a pack.

Thirty minutes later a hasty breakfast had been disposed of, patient Old Nig had assumed his burden, and the saddle-horses had been watered and geared.

Swinging up on the pinto, the girl gave Nig's leadrope a halfhitch around her saddlehorn and swung off into the gloom, still following the little valley.

Standing within the little circle of firelight, Benson slapped his boot-top with a rein and looked inquiringly at the puncher, who had already mounted.

"Looks like it's gonna be a nice mornin' fur a ride," Blondy remarked, after the two had observed each other in a strained silence.

"Uh-huh," Benson grunted. "By the way, which way you ridin'?"

"Don't ask me; show me," Blondy answered equably, sagging his weight on one stirrup to loot the picturated vest for the makings.

Benson scowled thoughtfully into the dying fire for a time, then appeared to arrive at a decision.

"Awright, son, if you're bound to have it your way, you're plumb welcome t' stick with us. I want to tell you, though, that we're what you might call outlaws, right now, and—"

"Maybe we better shuffle along," Blondy suggested, striking a match on the horn and turning his head sidewise while he lighted up.

"But you'll git into trouble, shore," Benson warned him. "You know what that means, in this man's country."

"Yes, an' you seen me horn Hollis some-inconsiderate, so we're all even on that. What you know 'bout things on this range you know, an' what I know, I know. One thing we both know is that they's things goin' on aroun' here that a jughead like Martindale can't handle—even if he's tryin'."

"Martindale's tryin' awright," Benson answered hastily, "but some o' them other jaspers is—"

Benson paused abruptly, stroked the drooping mustaches thoughtfully, then bored the unperturbed puncher with the darting sloe eyes as he added slowly, "Reck-on me'n you understands each other pretty well an' Martindale ain't no big puzzle t' either of us."

Benson swung up and put the roach-maned roan into the white winding trail, followed closely by the silver dun. In the bloom ahead, hoofs scraped and leather creaked as the waiting girl started the pinto and packhorse.

A mile of gentle incline, with the walls of the little valley steadily closing and swerving to westward, then the pinto's feet splashed across the stream, and the girl led them up a steep zigzagged path and turned straight south.

Blondy had been plains raised, so was no mountaineer. Yet he had an instinctive sense of direction. The flare of the match which lighted his second cigarette lighted also a serious young face that wore a puzzled frown. He was vaguely suspicious that since leaving Mesa the Bensons had led him in a circle that lacked little of being complete.

By the time that cigarette had been consumed and another had been lighted from its stub, the first exploring rays of a rising sun had commenced fingering tentatively about the tips of a cluster of lofty pinnacles to southward and a little west of them.

"Topknot, or I'm a Mex sheepherder!" Blondy confided to the dun's pointed ears.

Only minutes later the arrows of orange light on the highrocks had broadened to glaring inverted funnels as the brass sun swung above the misty plain east and south of them.

Stirring their willing mounts to a rapid jog, the little party climbed to the crest of a dome-like hill, directly west of which rugged Topknot loomed, now revealed in detail.

Winding through the serried pines of the hilltop, the girl jogged steadily down the southern slope, finally turning packhorse and pinto into a little depression on the hillside where alders and mountain ash, with here and there a scrub cedar, screened a little glade where mountain grass stood lush and a rocky basin caught the dribble of a small spring.

Dismounting there, the girl evidenced the characteristics of her sex the world over by letting down her mass of ebon hair and retiring to the shade of a spreading juniper to comb and brush it.

There was little conversation between the menfolk as they ungeared and picketed the horses.

BENSON'S movements were hurried, his seamed face serious as he helped Blondy stack their traps on a rocky shelf by the spring, then rummaged among the dunnage for a pair of moccasins.

"Better fur rock-scramblin'," he explained, noting a little curiosity in the puncher's eyes. "Ain't got a pair with you, have you?"

"Nope," Blondy answered. "Pretty nimble in my sockfeet, at a pinch, though."

"Well, it may be a pinch, an' a tight one, at that," Benson prophesied. "Say! Maybe I'd better tell you that—"

"Tell me nothin'," Blondy cut in. "I notice you're sorta in a rush, so shuffle ahead. I'm stickin'."

"C'mon, then," Benson grunted, rising and heaving the discarded boots on top of the pile of traps.

"You stick here, Bess," he ordered sternly, as he passed her tree.

As the girl only smiled in answer, he stopped to frown at her forbiddingly for a moment. Then the hundreds of tiny smile wrinkles that crisscrossed about the corners of his firm mouth creased as he said whimsically, "Well, do as you durn please then. You will anyway. Be careful though, not t' shoot outa your turn an' mess somethin'."

"Spoilt kid," he informed Blondy as the two breasted the south wall of the little pocket. "She's got no business here, but she just would come, whether or no. What 'ud you do if you had a gal like that on your hands?"

"Any time you decide that you can't put up with 'er no longer le' me know," Blondy answered, rearing back on his heels as they left the pocket and took to the brush-clad slope.

Fifty feet down the decline the brush ended on the rim of a low, rocky wall at the foot of which a network of shallow ravines, sand-floored, led to southward and eastward.

As Blondy had suspected, rugged Topknot loomed sunbathed on their right, while

the clustered shanties of Mesa stood out on the baked plain some two miles distant on their left.

The puncher's pipe assisted Benson's cheroot to haze the atmosphere beneath the juniper they had selected for a canopy as they discussed inconsequentials, while the brassy sun climbed higher.

Sprawled under a friendly juniper, Benson rolled to a hip and elbow, tilting the flopped brim of his brown felt hat down to fend off the glare as he gazed intently off to where four dots showed on the trail from Mesa.

"That's the big jugheaded sheriff an' his bunch," Blondy volunteered.

"Kinda expectin' 'im, wasn't you, Ol' Timer?" he added, grinning broadly.

"Well, I ain't what you might call plumb et up with surprise," Benson admitted, reflecting the puncher's smile. "Say! Ain't you never gonna ask me what the hell we're up to?" he inquired.

"Don't know, and don't care. Furthermore, I ain't been no spoutin' geyser of information myself, so we're all even up to now."

Benson frowned thoughtfully for a moment, then heaved to a sitting posture and pointed a forefinger at the puncher.

"Now look here, Mister!" he snapped. "I may squat here all day, or I may slide down there an' mix it with somebody—an' mix it good and hard. As I told you once before, if things comes to a place where you don't feel like—"

"They're fannin' out to give this broken ground a workin' over," Blondy cut in. "See, that's Martindale on the gray—the one that's turnin' into the gully next t' the bluff."

"Some eyes you got, son," Benson said, then added, with a note of excitement in his voice, "See Hollis anywheres?"

"Uh-huh. He's—"

"Secont gully?"

"No-o-o. Not yet, anyway. He's motionin' them spindle-shanked twins t' go over south somewheres, so I s'pose he's intendin' t'— Uh-huh. Secont gully, shore 'nuff. He ain't gone in yet, but—"

"I got him spotted now. Say, Blondy! You any good with a rope?"

"Plenty much. Why?"

"Why is that Martindale's comin' at a lope, an— Hey, Bess! Bring two ropes over here, pronto, if not prontoer!"

CATCHING the idea at once, Blondy had his boots off by the time the nimble-footed girl had burst out of the brush to throw them their ropes.

In another moment he had started to follow Benson down a precarious path that led down the low cliff wall. As he left the rim, Blondy noted that Hollis had disappeared, presumably into the other gully.

Racing over the hot sand to where the first gully joined the wall, Benson stationed himself on one side, motioning Blondy to the other.

"Hawse's yourn; the man's mine. Throw when you're ready."

"Ss-sh! He's comin'!"

With his hat pulled low over his eyes and his dusty black neckcloth covering his lower face, the big sheriff rode slouched over the horn.

When a hissing rawhide loop snaked out to settle snugly behind the loping gray's jowl, the rope-wise horse braked to a sliding stop, throwing the surprised sheriff against the horn.

Instinctively following the rope with his eye, Martindale saw it end at the sinewy hands of a lank puncher who held it at his hip and braced with his socked feet to keep it taut. Thinking quickly for once, Martindale set spurs to the unwilling horse and rammed right at the puncher, at the same time clawing at his holster.

The next moment he gave a startled grunt as a whirling coil settled over him, pinioning his massive arms and jerking him out of saddle.

Piling atop the fallen man, Blondy rolled him over on his face and held him tightly while Benson deftly fettered his wrists and elbows.

"Tie that hawse t' a bush, then take this here law-emblem up the bluff an' close-herd 'im!"

"You fellers'll shore pay fur this," Martindale grated, glaring hotly at his captors and heaving at his bonds with his mighty muscles. "When I git loose I'll—"

"Walk," Blondy directed, crisply, as Benson turned to scramble out of the gully on the far side.

Hazing the big man up the bluff, Blondy found the girl waiting at the top with Benson's rifle in her hand and her chin set determinedly.

Glancing back toward the flat as he led Martindale into the brush, he saw Benson running swiftly toward the second gully, the one Hollis had entered at the far end.

"Just a second, Miss," he drawled as the girl started to pass.

Tapping one foot impatiently and watching her father closely, she waited uneasily while he bound the sheriff to a tree back of the fringe of brush, then gagged him securely.

"Lend me that rifle, please," Blondy requested.

"Sorry, but I have use for it," she answered rebelliously, then turned to go down.

IN TWO swift strides the puncher reached her side. Grasping her by the shoulder he swung her around and shook her as one would a naughty child, then wrenched the rifle out of her grasp and shoved her back into the brush.

"Tell you what, Miss Benson," he drawled, evenly and impersonally, "your dad says you're a spoilt kid, dead set on havin' your own way. I'm just that way myself, so one of us is gonna hafta give in. It ain't gonna be me. You foller me down that bluff, an' I'm gonna just nachully take you an' spank you."

"But you wouldn't dare—"

"Try me," he invited, then released his grip and turned his back to catch the rifle by its barrel and slide down the wall without looking back.

Finally she sat down, red-faced and stormy-browed, and sullenly watched Blondy cross the first gully and race across the burning sands toward where Benson was nearing the second.

Blondy slowed his headlong rush and proceeded more cautiously when he saw Benson drop to his hands and knees, lifting his shaggy head occasionally to peer into the wash beyond as he crept slowly toward it.

Then Blondy's attention was drawn by the white peak of a high-crowned hat which bobbed in sight a little way down the wash, proceeded steadily to a spot nearly opposite where Benson was crawling along on all fours, then disappeared as its owner stopped and dismounted.

Rising in the center of the shallow wash at that spot, was a domelike dune at the top of which a clump of sumac plumed out like a fowl's topknot.

Seeing Benson halt and drop behind a low bush, Blondy, still a hundred yards behind, followed his example just as the squat deputy's head and shoulders appeared as he climbed the dune afoot.

As his eyes reached the level of the plain Hollis stopped to scan it carefully in all

directions, giving particular attention to the gully which Martindale had entered.

Apparently satisfied that no one was in sight, the deputy dropped to his knees and commenced clawing into the hot sand with his hands, right at the roots of the sumac.

Rising and trotting forward, Benson was at the edge of the gully when Hollis rose with a flat, oblong packet in his hand. Slapping sand off it on his trousers' leg, he had opened his shirt to tuck it inside when Benson called, "Easy as you are, Hollis! Stick 'em up, quick!" he added, crisply, as the deputy whirled about in surprise.

First paling through his tan, then flaming hot with fighting spirit, Hollis withdrew his hand from his shirt front with a snap, at the same time throwing himself down and rolling behind the crest of the knoll.

As the deputy dropped, Benson took a quick snapshot at him, then swayed back and toppled over with a bullet through his shoulder as Hollis' six spat a spiteful answer.

Changing his gun to his left hand, Benson raked the sumac closely as he reeled weakly to the edge of the gully and dropped down inside, evidently bent upon coming to grips.

Separating and spurring their straining mounts madly, each of the twins circled toward the puncher's flank as he stalked steadily forward, holding his fire, but keeping the rifle trained on the sumac topping the knoll.

Benson started crawling up the near side of the little knoll making slow progress, with one arm dangling. He stopped at Blondy's call.

"Circle on 'im, Ol' Timer, an' watch out fur yourself! I'll tend t' them other geezers!"

Getting within range one of the Prestons wrenched his mount to a sliding stop, dropped off on the far side and crouched to fire under his bronc's neck, only to drop on his face like a stricken beef when the puncher's rifle bellowed angrily.

Maddened at the sight, the other twin ceased working toward Blondy's flank and bore straight at him with the reins on the horn and both guns smoking.

With only the gully between them now, Blondy fired his second shot, coolly and calculatingly, then threw down the rifle and leaped into the swale as his target slumped over his mount's neck, clutched at the horn with weak, groping fingers,

then lost seat and rolled to the sand where he lay without a tremor.

As the puncher caught his balance after his leap, Hollis rose from his sumac, his dark face distorted with rage, his even white teeth flashing between thick lips as he swung a gun above the brush and snarled, "Take that, damn you!"

In that split second the deputy's gun flared straight up as an arrow of fire lanced out from the puncher's hip.

Swaying far back, then fighting his way grimly to an upright position, Hollis set his square jaw and tried to raise his wavering gun for another shot, then folded slowly, joint by joint, and collapsed in an inert heap beside the sumac as the puncher's second bullet crashed into his temple.

"How you ridin', Benson?" Blondy called, holstering his smoking gun.

"Fair t' middlin'," Benson answered, squirming to a sitting posture and grinning wanly. "Don't go near that geezer Hollis! I want Martindale t' see 'im just as he is."

"Oh, Daddy! You hurt bad?" the girl's shrill voice rang down anxiously from the bluff.

"Na-a-w!" Benson bawled back, wincing with the effort. "Got a slug in my shoulder muscles, tha's all! Turn Martindale loose, an' haze 'im down here!"

"Ain't that some risky t' let a gal tackle a job like that?"

"Uh-huh, it's risky," Benson answered, feeling his wound gingerly. "Risky fur Martindale!"

A minute brought the sheriff, black-browed and stern-jawed, tramping ahead of the girl and fairly ablaze with righteous anger.

"Well," he grated gamely, "suppose you damn' blackhearted murderers wanta kill me next, an' make a clean job of it. Go ahead an' crack down. You won't hear me squeal."

"Guess again," Benson came back evenly. "I'm just astin' a little favor, that's all. Climb up there and see what Hollis has got inside 'is shirt!"

THE sheriff's heavy jaw sagged as he gazed into the sloe eyes of the little iron-gray man. Finally he mopped his sweat-beaded forehead and mumbled dazedly, "You don't mean—"

"Shore do," Benson cut in. "Hollis just dug up the ten thousand he got off Ol' Dick

Wade in that stage holdup. I watched him cache the stuff here, yesterday mornin', but I had t' ketch 'im with th' goods on 'im. Go git it. Then you'll know what's what!"

Still, as one in a daze, the bewildered sheriff tramped heavily to the crest of the knoll and bent over his fallen deputy.

Soon he straightened, in his hand the sheaf of bills he had removed from their smudged envelope.

Jerking his star off his suspender, Martindale threw it high and far, then watched it fall, mustering a sheepish grin as he tramped back down the knoll.

"Done sheriffin'," he announced tersely.

"How come?" Blondy inquired, smiling slowly. "Ain't you just ketched a stage robber an' recovered the swag, at that?"

"No, I ain't," Martindale answered glumly. "The way folks'll tell it is that my pet deputy went and got ketched by a—er—by—"

"By Lone Wolf Benson, head detective fur the express company in charge of this here division," Benson supplied helpfully.

"One bad thing though, Blondy," Benson added, scowling a little uneasily. "'Course I'm a officer, but you— Wall, it's too damn' bad you went and plugged them two youngsters plumb dead. Both of 'em was officers, so—"

"Onct more we're all even," Blondy came back, unperturbed, slanting a shrewd eye at the girl's worried face. "I'm special investigator fur the Cattleraisers' Association, an' them two red-headed, toad-specked sons-of-guns was rustlers, along with Hollis. I trailed 'em down here after the last raid over north, an' was waitin' fur a chanc t' abduct 'em, knowin' that Martindale wouldn't give 'em up."

"You go git that star, Martindale," he said, "an' keep right on sheriffin'. All the dear public needs t' know is that Hollis packed your posse with crooks headed by hisself, an' you got onto 'im an' got us t' help you smear 'em!"

SADDLED and mounted, the three on the hill watched a rolling brown dust cloud creep lazily into the Mesa trail—a dust cloud raised by the sheriff followed by three horses, each carrying a body.

With no tie-rope on him this time, fat, contented Nig nipped playfully at the pinto's flank. A little way ahead Benson twisted around in saddle to rest a hand on the roan's sleek flank and look past the

girl to where the puncher sat, rolling his inevitable cigarette.

"Us fur home—an' fur good, at that," Benson announced soberly, then explained in answer to the puncher's look of inquiry, "I promised Bess that this 'ud be my last trip out after 'em.

"Maybe just as well, at that," he added, a little sorrowfully. "Reckon I'm gittin' too old t' handle myself just right. Comin' plumb clean, I'm spoutin' it that Hollis 'ud a got me shore, if it hadn't been fur you. Furdernmore, if he didn't, them damn' twins would. Ho-hum! Well, as I was sayin', we're ramblin' fur our ranch over in the short grass southeast of Pueblo. Couldn't be that you could shack along over there with us an' rest up fur a spell—if you kin spare the time?"

With his hands cupped about a flaming match, Blondy allowed it to blaze unnoticed as he looked past it, straight into the eyes of the girl.

"Ride, folks," he drawled, gathering up his rein, then adding impudently as the

smiling girl blushed rosy under his steady scrutiny, "Seems like we orter git better acquainted, so I reckon I kin spare you a little time. Say a billion years, or some-thin' like that."

Accustomed to following the pinto, Nig pinned his ears back petulantly and took two protesting steps at a jog, when the puncher leaned over and flecked him lightly on the rump with his fringed quirt.

Seconds later, when the girl's spurs raked his flank as a sly hint, the old pack-horse spurted ahead resignedly to fall in behind Benson, his place beside the girl being taken at once by the silver dun.

Peering slantwise from beneath the flopped brim of his battered hat while rounding the next turn of the path, the iron-gray man in the lead caught the meaning of the new arrangement and smiled shrewdly as he broke into song:

When a gal an' a buckaroo
Aims fur t' make it do,
No trail needs widenin'
Fur them two t' go ridin' in.

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THE DEAD PAY THEIR DEBTS

by **GEORGE E. CLARK**

Those lawmen had ridden far to kill Red Jackson—yet fate flung them into a tight, where their guns must buy vengeance for the dead owlhooter they hated!

THE tired roan mare, no longer guided by the half-conscious man in the saddle, came to a halt at the bank of the dried-up creek. Rusty Bascom roused himself and painfully pushed his fever-seared body erect.

He swayed dizzily. His eyes, blood-shot and aching, stared through the tangle of his reddish hair, made out the hot, glistening gravel of the creek bed.

Despair crawled into his sluggish mind, holding him rigid. He had been certain of finding water in these hills, had gloated over the ease with which he had shaken off his pursuers, who were bent on lynching him for a brutal barroom killing.

"Damn yore ornery hide!" he snarled suddenly; and blind rage gave him the strength to rake a cruelly sharp rowel across the mare's raw side.

The horse plunged gamely down the declivity, caught her balance and swerved up the creek bed, her unsteady hoofs scattering gravel. A moan broke from Rusty's swollen lips; for any sudden movement caused the wound in his left thigh to send agonizing pains shooting through his whole body.

Unable to turn the mare's head, he could only stick to the saddle and hope she wouldn't go down. If she stumbled and fell, he was done for. . . .

It was the end of the trail for man and beast, and Rusty knew it. Every time the laboring mare stumbled, he held his breath, expecting the inevitable.

TWO days ago, in Dos Piedras, he had put a slug through the heart of a drunken waddy, who had been sober enough, however, to catch the red-headed drifter cheating him at poker. As it turned out, the jasper was unarmed, and popular to boot; so Rusty, the hard-faced, quick-shooting stranger, was branded a murderer.

But Rusty Bascom had killed suddenly and ruthlessly before, and he wasn't caught napping this time. The posse was hastily organized, poorly directed; the slim, long-bodied roan outran the whole vengeance-mad pack.

True, a single bullet had found him, but Rusty scorned the leg wound. He still packed in various parts of his tough body three slugs from past gun battles, and he hadn't expected this clean carbine wound to prove dangerous.

But his luck had played out suddenly, after he left the valley. Cutting back at nightfall, he had crossed the badlands that bordered the Mal Suerte foothills, outwitting his straggling pursuers. Now he knew the joke had been on himself.

In this driest of years, when the whole range below was suffering from the drought, he should have known that every spring and stream on this side of the mountains had disappeared. Not only was there no water; where there should have been grass there were now only brown, sun-scorched wisps of powder that even the gaunt, suffering mare could not eat. . . .

As the roan struggled on up the rocky course, Rusty fell into a lethargy, so that the end came with shattering abruptness. The saddle lurched, and he found himself sprawling on the gravel. Stunned, he felt no great pain. He lay there and watched the desperate mare strive vainly to rise.

She gave it up finally, turned and looked at Rusty in mute appeal. He cursed, rolled over and drew his right-hand cutter.

"Orter let you die the hard way," he growled thickly. "Trusted yore critter's savvy to take me to water, damn you!"

But he found a certain satisfaction in killing the horse. He had to use both hands to steady the heavy .44, finally pulled the trigger. As the gun roared, the mare's head dropped and she fell over, quivering.

"You're plumb lucky," Rusty rasped, and looked down at the gun in his hand. He shuddered, knowing that he lacked the guts to do for himself what he had done for his horse.

He would live for hours—long, agonizing hours of freezing night and burning day. Death would come slowly, while fever burned like the fires of hell in his pain-racked body.

Wild with desperation, he struggled erect, fighting the torture of his left leg. He stood tottering a moment, his head reeling. He knew he couldn't crawl far, much less walk, but he was mad with fear.

With the first step he fell headlong, and knives of pain ripped through him. Then a wave of nausea, and blackness flooded over him, blotting out all sensation.

THE sound of running water was in his ears when Rusty awoke. Afraid to trust to his senses, he opened his eyes, blinked them several times. He stared in amazement at the small stream, not eight feet away. He rolled over and saw the rude log cabin on the other side of him, and understanding dawned in his bewildered mind.

Some jasper had brought him here, had laid him beside this stream, in the shade of a small jack pine. Rusty wondered how it had happened, and who the gent was.

"Some old prospector, most likely," he decided, from the look of his layout. The rest of his questions could be answered in good time, but right now he was burning with thirst, and hungry too.

He threw off the dirty blanket covering him and crawled down to the stream. Lying on his belly, he sucked up water until his

lungs threatened to burst, caught his breath and drank again.

He felt better almost immediately. He was weak and unsteady on his legs, but he was surprised to find that he could walk without great pain. The wound was healing in fine shape, and the fever was gone from his body.

"Funny," he mused. "I was expectin' to cash in my chips, an' here I am alive an' kickin'. Reckon I must've been here mebbe two-three days."

Now that he thought of it, he seemed to remember talking to someone—a gruff-voiced hombre who had cursed him good-naturedly while forcing a trickle of warm water down his throat.

But he scowled suddenly, noticing that his guns and cartridge belt had been taken from him. Only natural, considering he'd been sick and out of his head; but Rusty trusted no man, and he intended to get his hoglegs back pronto.

He hobbled slowly to the cabin, pushed open the door and entered. It wasn't much of a cabin. A single room, hardly large enough for one man. The walls had been hastily or carelessly built of unpeeled logs, the cracks plastered with red clay.

Rusty was just beginning the search for his guns when a voice startled him.

"Howdy, stranger. Lookin' for something?"

Rusty swung around and stared at the gaunt, bearded man in the doorway—as salty-looking a customer as Rusty had ever faced. His pale blue eyes were cold and unwavering as they bored into Rusty's; yet they were not unfriendly, merely cool and impersonal.

"Lookin' for something?" he repeated. Rusty's thin lips tightened. "My shootin' irons," he rasped. "I want 'em. Right now."

"ou'll git 'em back—when you need 'em," the bearded man retorted gruffly. "That may be soon, or it may not."

As if the matter were settled, he strode across the dirt floor and got a battered, smoke-blackened lard pail and a handful of potatoes. Rusty watched him begin the preparations for supper. The cabin boasted no stove, and Rusty followed his silent host outside to a rude fireplace of stones.

HE HAD a chance to look the jasper over, and Rusty's sharp eyes missed nothing. He decided his first hunch had been right, that the man was a prospector. The splotches of red and yellow mud on

his boots and faded denims proclaimed his occupation.

Two details of the miner's appearance held Rusty's narrow-eyed attention. One was the color of his hair, which was nearly as red as Rusty's own; and it made Rusty wonder what the jasper's face looked like without that bushy, dull red beard. The other detail was the heavy revolver on the miner's right thigh—a beautifully ornate weapon with a filigree of inlaid silver stud-ding the carved ivory handle.

"Right now he may be prospectin' for gold, but that ain't no desert rat's hogleg he's packin'."

The thought made Rusty size him up more suspiciously than ever; he had a feeling the red-bearded jasper could handle his fancy iron. Suddenly he demanded:

"How'd you happen to find me?"

"Heard yore shot, when you killed yore hoss," the prospector explained briefly, without turning. He squatted before the fireplace and carefully fanned some chips into crackling flame.

"Didn't think there was water anywhere in these hills," Rusty observed, after a moment.

"You was almost right. Everything's dried up except this crick. Lucky for me I got my diggin' on this stream, or I'd have to quit."

Rusty hesitated. Holding his voice steady, he asked casually, "Pannin' out much color?"

"Enough," said the miner. He turned and looked at Rusty over his shoulder, looked him carefully up and down. "Enough," he finally added, "to keep two men busy for the next few months."

Rusty got his meaning, and caught his breath. The jasper had struck it rich! He needed a partner, and he was offering Rusty the chance to throw in with him.

The thought of a bonanza, of sudden wealth, made Rusty's mind race. He wondered how much gold the miner had already panned. Rusty had no taste for hard, back-breaking toil, but if he could get his hands on this jasper's hoard of yellow dust. . . .

"Some gents from down yonder might mosey up here with their eyes peeled for me," Rusty ventured. "Otherwise I'd—"

"Not a chance, Red," the miner cut in. "You'll be plumb safe here. Not many've seen my shack, an' I'm alone in these hills. Been watchin', an' I reckon you throwed 'em clean off'n yore trail."

Rusty's eyes widened. "Call me Rusty,"

he said, and held out his hand. The red-bearded prospector stood up, and the grip of his horny palm was like the jaws of a steel bear trap.

"I'm Murdock," he said.

"I figured you was hidin' out," Rusty said.

"If you mean the law," Murdock retorted, "you was wrong. I had trouble with my wife, an'—" He broke off, then added harshly, "But never mind that. You aimin' to stick here with me?"

Rusty appeared to consider the proposition, finally nodded. "I ain't afraid of work, when it pays in the yellow stuff," he asserted, with unnecessary vigor.

Murdock nodded. "It's payin'," he said, and let the matter drop.

Rusty waited until they had wolfed the meal of boiled potatoes mixed with chunks of venison. Then, rolling a quirly from Murdock's makings, he asked casually, "Been here long?"

"Four months. Built this shack an' prospected along the south fork, where I found you. No luck till last month, but she's runnin' high where I'm workin' now."

Rusty's heart fell. There wasn't much chance that Murdock had stored up much gold in only a month. His first plan was no good; but even as he discarded it, Rusty's scheming mind hit on another.

All he had to do was get his guns back, pretend to throw in with Murdock till he found how much gold the prospector had cached. Working together, they could pan enough dust to make one man a rich stake in a short time, if Murdock's story was true. . . .

But Murdock did not offer to return his hoglegs, and Rusty doubted it was through oversight. Plainly, the red-bearded jasper didn't trust him!

WORRIED, Rusty tried to puzzle it out. Why had Murdock offered to make him his partner if he didn't trust him enough to return his guns? Why—unless he had Rusty's own crooked plan in mind, to let Rusty do half of the work, thus doubling the amount of gold panned; and then, when he had his stake, to settle the question of ownership with a bullet from that low-holstered, fancy cutter of his!

"The double-crossing skunk!" Rusty thought, and began grimly to debate his next move.

Murdock, hunkered down before the glowing embers of the fire, talked ramblingly of gold towns he had visited, of his

journey across the mountains through a hidden pass he had discovered. Rusty gathered that he had never visited Dos Piedras or any of the country below the Mal Suerte foothills; and in spite of the jasper's denial, the suspicion returned to Rusty's mind that Murdock was hiding out from the law. . . .

"Reckon I'll hunt up Jenny an' Pete," the miner announced abruptly, as the shadows of nightfall began to creep down the canyon. "I let 'em hunt grass in the day but hobble 'em come night."

"Burros?" Rusty asked.

Murdock shook his head. "Jenny's a pack mule an' Pete's the best horse that ever felt saddle leather. I travel fast when I feel like a change of scenery."

"Go ahead, my leg ain't in shape for walkin' much," Rusty said carelessly. He was convinced, now, that Murdock was a fugitive, ready to hit leather at the first sign of danger.

At the same time, he was elated to learn that the strange prospector had a fast horse. Let him only get back his guns, and Rusty knew exactly what his next play would be.

He could hardly restrain his excitement, but he waited until Murdock had been gone several minutes before he returned to the search for his guns. To his surprise, he found them almost immediately. Murdock had merely shoved them under his bunk, where he kept his saddle and other objects, which otherwise would have crowded the small room.

Buckling on his cartridge belt, Rusty gloated at his luck. He must have had this Murdock all wrong; the jasper wasn't crafty at all, just dumb. In his excitement, Rusty had been unduly suspicious, attributing to this straight-talking, honest-intentioned miner all his own crooked motives.

"Jest a plain damn fool," Rusty decided contemptuously. "Now to find where his dust is hid out. . . ."

But he had no time to look for the gold. Murdock returned almost immediately, whistling a tune. So he trusted Rusty, after all. He must have intended to give Rusty his guns, must have meant his proposition as a square deal. Even that talk about trouble with his wife had been the truth, then, and Murdock wasn't hiding from the law.

RUSTY'S lip curled, for he had only contempt for a man who would let a woman drive him off into the hills to live like a half-starved cur. Gold or no gold, these prospectors were all loco!

Murdock came to the door and peered in. "There's a candle on the table," he said. "Why didn't you light up?"

Rusty mumbled a reply, stepped back and let Murdock find the candle and light it. Taking no chances, he drew his guns while Murdock's back was turned.

"Reach for the ceiling, Murdock!" he snarled. "I'm takin' yore iron!"

The miner stiffened, slowly turned, his hands rising. "Reckon you're makin' a mistake," he said harshly, and his right hand suddenly flashed downward. Even with all the odds against him, he nearly cleared leather before Rusty could fire.

Rusty's slug ripped into Murdock's right shoulder spinning him around. Under the shocking force of that heavy .44 bullet, the miner staggered and almost fell.

Furious, trembling with the realization that Murdock would have shot him dead in a fair show-down, Rusty rasped, "Keep yore hands up, or I'll drill you!"

Quickly he holstered his left-hand cutter, stepped forward and disarmed the slowly recovering Murdock.

"Now—where you got yore gold hid?" Rusty snarled. "I want it—all of it!"

Murdock raised his left hand, pointed. "It's in plain sight, almost," he said dully. "Over there, in that saddle bag."

"Get it out!"

Murdock obeyed. Rusty took the small buckskin pouch from him, hefted it calculatingly. "Ain't more'n nine or ten ounces here, at the outside!" he scowled. "Where's the rest?"

"That's all I got," Murdock snapped. His hard blue eyes were beginning to blaze. "What you aimin' to do, you gun-crazy polecat! I saved yore life for you—offered you a chance to make a clean start. Figured you got into some trouble that taught you a lesson—that a little honest work would change yore slant on things, like it has mine. . . ."

"Never mind the preachin'!" Rusty sneered. "I want the rest of that dust. Where is it?"

"You got all there is!" Murdock retorted fiercely. "What you aimin' to do, you stinkin' varmint!"

Pale with rage, Rusty eagerly fingered his six-gun. "I'm gonna kill you, Murdock!" he taunted. "I was gonna let you live to pan gold for me, but I hate preachers, an' I ain't takin' chances with no gun-slick hombre like you. So you an' me is

tradin' places before it's too late to change!"

Murdock stared at him, reading death in Rusty's slitted eyes and cruel, tight-lipped mouth.

"So it's murder!" he snarled hoarsely. "You—the jasper I nursed back to life, askin' no questions—you're gonna kill me! I should've knowned. When a man saves a sidewinder from death—"

He broke off, laughed recklessly. "Well, I ain't afraid to die, savvy? I knowed it was in the cards for me to pay off some day, only I didn't figure it would come this way. But if you think that by murderin' me you can escape—"

He never finished his warning. Rusty's gun roared once, bucking savagely in his hand; and Murdock crumpled, a round, dark hole over his left eyebrow.

Rusty slowly holstered the six-gun. "Look more like suicide if the slug was in his temple," he reflected. "But it's close enough." And he added venomously, "The damn preacher!"

Staring down at the bearded face, he ran his fingers over the stubble on his own chin. A thoughtful gleam was in his narrowed gray eyes. Abruptly he nodded, picked up the candle and began to look for a razor, or anything sharp enough to cut off that bushy, dull red beard . . .

TIRED and sweaty, Rusty slowly plodded back toward the cabin, glad to leave the diggings for another day. He had lost count of time, but he reckoned nearly two months had passed since the night he had blasted Murdock into eternity.

He was discouraged and almost ready to quit; the work was too hard for his liking. He estimated that he now had four thousand dollars and more of precious metal, but that seemed small pay for so much toil.

Yet every day he returned to the job, unwilling to give up the gold that was here for the taking. He was about ready to saddle Murdock's fine gelding, though, and hit the trail for other parts. With not less than four thousand dollars in his poke, Rusty could have a roaring time in the saloons, dance halls and gambling places of a dozen boom towns he wanted to visit . . .

A huge turkey buzzard, soaring overhead, cast a shadow that made Rusty look up. He grinned. There wasn't much left of his roan mare now, or of Murdock either.

The realization that his plan had worked

to perfection cheered him somewhat, so that by the time he was back at the cabin and getting supper ready, he was humming an almost forgotten tune.

Nobody had come up here to bother him, but Rusty knew his plan had been a good one, all the same. He had cut off Murdock's beard and changed clothes with the corpse, which he had hauled on the mule to the dry creek and left beside the sun-blasted body of his mare. He had even exchanged his twin six-guns for Murdock's fancy, beautifully made .45 Colt.

Lately he had had a feeling that he was being watched, and this had bred a constant uneasiness that made him anxious to pull his stakes and clear out of her. But he never saw anyone, so it must be the unbroken loneliness that was making him jumpy. Like Murdock, he would almost have welcomed the sight of another human being, good or bad, friend or foe.

Anyway, he was ready in case anyone ever happened along. His thick, rust-colored beard and Murdock's mud-spattered clothes, plus the slain miner's ornamented gun, would enable Rusty to pass for his victim, even with the few who had met Murdock.

He ate a scanty meal of soggy flapjacks. Murdock's supplies were running low now; Rusty had wasted two days hunting vainly for something he could kill that would provide fresh meat. He was still hungry, and longing for a smoke, when he went to the hiding place where his gold was hoarded, to add the dust and nuggets he had acquired today.

At the base of a spruce near the cabin, he lifted a large stone; from the hole beneath he drew a heavy leather sack. He carefully poured in the new gold, replaced the stone. As he straightened, he heard the sound of footsteps. He tensed, hand going to his cutter.

"Hold it, Jackson!" a sharp voice warned.

Rusty whirled uncertainly. A man had stepped from behind the cabin, a small, wiry-looking gent wearing a flat-crowned black hat. He hadn't drawn his gun, but Rusty didn't know whether to feel relieved or alarmed. He had never killed a man in a fair show-down; and the sight of an armed adversary, ready to draw, chilled him.

"We been trailin' you a long time, Red Jackson!" the man jeered. "Finally caught up with you, though!"

"Hell, we cut sign on you a dozen times," another voice sneered, "but you always got away."

RUSTY turned his head. A second man younger than the first, had stepped into the clearing. And while Rusty tried to figure what it meant, a third, freckled-faced jasper, came out of the thicket on his right.

"Listen, you fellers is smellin' around the wrong hole!" Rusty blurted. "My name ain't Jackson!"

"The hell it ain't!" retorted the small man, his black eyes smoking with wrath. "What is yore name, then?"

"Murdock," Rusty said quickly.

"Murdock!" snorted the freckled youth, and laughed. "We knowed that would be yore handle when we caught up with you—we been hearin' you called that in every town you passed through. Red Murdock—Red Jackson. Same dirty, woman-killin', child-abandonin' skunk!"

They were closing in on him, slowly, cautiously, like wolves encircling their prey.

Cold sweat stood out on Rusty's forehead. He licked his dry lips, gasped out: "Wait—wait! No gun play till I know what it's all about! Did—did Murdock kill his wife? Is that what he meant by—by havin' trouble with her?"

The small man glared at him. "Talk sense, Jackson! This is a show-down, an' yuh might as well face it. We're three agin one, but that jest about makes us even, you bein' the gun wizard you are. Awright—make yore play!"

They waited, the three of them, half-crouched, ready for his slightest move. Rusty stood motionless, his thoughts confused and desperate.

"I ain't Murdock!" he pleaded wildly. "I ain't him, or Jackson either. I'm Rusty Bascom, see? I—"

One of the men laughed; the oldest man cursed.

"So you're yellin' too, besides bein' a murderer!" the small man rasped. "Well, if yore red hair wasn't plenty for us to know you by, that six-gun on yore leg is all the proof we need! I got the mate to it, Jackson—the gun you lost, the night you killed my daughter an' shot yore way through the posse that had come to take you!"

He patted the silver-studded gun butt at his hip, nodded significantly at the weapon Rusty was wearing.

"I reckon yuh figured Molly laid that trap for yuh, Jackson," he went on bitterly. "But she didn't, even if you was an outlaw with a price on yore head. She lived long enough to send word to me an' her brothers, an' the sheriff turned over yore lost hogleg to us. We been trailin' you ever since—across two states. You're a gun-slick, Jackson, but you won't kill all of us. One or two of us, anyhow, will go back to raise up the baby daughter you left to die!"

"Make yore play, Jackson!" the freckled youth jeered. "We're givin' you a chance you don't deserve—what're you waitin' for?"

"Aw let's kill the coyote!" his brother rasped. "If he won't make a move, I will!"

Rusty, with a protest forming on his lips, saw the beginning of the youngster's draw, knew it was now or never.

His hand streaked to his gun butt, came up spitting fire before the impulsive youth could clear leather. But Rusty's bullet never reached its mark; for the roar of another gun merged with his own, and a split second after his shot plowed a furrow at his opponent's feet, Rusty pitched forward on his face.

THE small, black-hatted man stepped forward, the gun in his hand trailing a thin stream of black-powder smoke.

"He'll never know it was his own iron that killed him," he said. And reaching down, he took the engraved, silver-studded gun from his victim's limp fingers.

"Look here, boys!" he said. "Both irons is the same! I can't figure a proud, nervy gent like Red Jackson turnin' plumb yellin'. Why, he might've knowed this gun he still had would be a dead giveaway!"

"Aw, these killers is all yellin', Paw," the freckled one said contemptuously. "With the odds even—"

"Hey, look!" his brother yelled, as he tore aside the heavy stone he had seen Rusty replacing. "This here's his cache, sure enough!" He drew out the heavy sack, raised it excitedly. "Must be five thousand or so in dust, Paw!"

The young ranny's father stood looking down at the unexpected treasure, a wistful look in his dark eyes.

"Son, I reckon the man that murdered yore sister did one good deed in his life," he said softly. "He worked here an' dug all that gold—his first honest dollar, I reckon."

An' every ounce of that stuff is gonna benefit the child he deserted. I'll invest it for little Nan myself, an' see she gets the good of it when she's grewed up."

His sons nodded. "It's Nan's by rights," they agreed.

"But," the younger son puzzled, "I still can't figure how you beat Red Jackson to the draw, Paw. I know you're pretty fast, but you ain't no wizard like he was s'posed to be. Do—do you reckon maybe that body we found down yonder, in the crick bed—"

"Aw, that's the killer they was huntin' down in Dos Piedras!" snorted his brother. "Same roan hoss, same clothes, guns—everything. His hair was a mite red-like, but don't mean nothin'. He didn't have no

whiskers, like we knowed Jackson was growin', an'—"

"Sure, sure, that's right," the other agreed hastily. "I gotta hand it to you, Paw—you faded Red Jackson hisself!"

The small man nodded musingly.

"Reckon I did," he said slowly. "With his own gun. That's kinda funny, too, 'cause Jackson was plumb superstitious about them fancy six-guns of his'n. Claimed all his luck was in them."

"But he lost one of them twin cutters, Paw."

"That's jest it," the father said. "I reckon on the gun I shot him with was jest 'a mite luckier than the one he had. Luckier for us—not for him!"



TEN STORY

SPORTS



AUGUST ISSUE

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NOW ON SALE

Baseball THE NOTHING PITCHER Curtis Bishop

How could George Dawson justify the quarter of a million dollars that had been spent to bring him to the Panthers... when the arm that had won 27 games the year before was dead, and now capable only of relief work... if at all?

Fight RINGSIDE JURY T. W. Ford

These ringsiders were here for more than just to watch Flinger Caffey fight... they were here to try him for murder!

Baseball THERE'S ALWAYS NEXT YEAR...Giles A. Lutz

He was a good enough player for any team in the majors... except the outfit who owned his contract!

Wrestling TACKLING DUMMY Robert Leslie Bellam

The punk didn't know who he was, or where he came from... but he knew enough to pin the shoulders of the world's heavyweight champion!

Horseracing ..MUDDER MCCREE Nelson S. Bond

If Mudder McCree booted home a winner in the Kentucky Derby, the wreath would be awaiting him... and a bullet!

Baseball ROWDY Zene Tuttler

He might as well be what he was called... so Hank Rollins set out to prove himself the biggest trouble-maker in the Majors!

Track FERDINAND THE BULL-THROWER..Eric Rober

Ferdy could talk a great race... but could he run it?

Lacrosse BITTER VICTORY Jock Carroll

Being the greatest athlete in Harvard had turned Bruce England into the greatest heel in Canada!

Base' all, etc..SPORT SLANTS Wilcey Earle

In... from the Diamond, the ring and the whirl of sports!

Fig. THE FIVE-GRAND PALOOKA ..Joseph Bruce Fox

He was a naturally leather-pushing dynamite, but until an old timer showed him how to ignite the spark, his rumble seat was first cousin to the canvas!



GUNS AGAINST THE LAW

by JOSEPH L. CHADWICK

DAVE RANSOM, deputy sheriff, belted on his six-gun and stepped to the door of the office. A crowd in the boom town of Sorry Corners usually meant trouble, and the crowd of twenty or so men coming along the dusty street was a grim-faced lot.

Lean and hard of body, Ransom stood in the doorway and watched the oncoming group with narrowed eyes. He knew all of the men. About half of them were leading citizens of the town, respectable residents and businessmen. The others were newcomers, tough hombres connected with the gold camps. They converged on the sheriff's office, crowding up to the door.

"Goin' somewheres, gents?" the lanky deputy drawled.

No one answered at once. Then Bart Mingaloe, manager of the Lonesome Lou mine, shouldered his way to the fore. Mingaloe's ruddy face had steel-blue eyes and a traplike mouth. He dressed like a dude, in a black store suit, low-heeled Eastern boots, and pearl gray Stetson.

"Right here," he announced.

"Yeah?" Ransom said. "What fer?"

"We don't hanker tuh palaver long, Ransom," Mingaloe said. "We're hyar tuh tell yuh that yuh're through as deputy. The citizens of Sorry Corners decided at a meetin' tuh take law enforcement into their own hands."

"So?" the lawman drawled, angry lights flickering in his eyes. Then: "Sheriff Hodge swore me in, an' I reckon he'll have tuh take away my star."

Mingaloe smiled mockingly. He pulled

a long black cheroot from his pocket and rolled it between his fingers. "Yuh reckon wrong," he said. "The sheriff is laid up with a bullet hole in his back. That's one reason why we citizens figger on takin' over."

"Yuh got over reasons?"

"Plenty!" the mine manager growled. And the crowd, muttering angrily, backed him up. "The sheriff was drygulched. To date yuh ain't caught his ambusher. It plumb looks as if yuh the law is on siesta hereabouts—"

"Yeah! An' not only that!" It was little Midge Evers, the storekeeper, pushing up, shaking his fist at the lawman. "It's plumb disgraceful! Thievin' goin' on right under yore nose, Deppity! Yesterday that camp robber, Quirt Bayman, stole a sack o' flour outa my store—"

Banker Eli Jergins, a pompous, pink-face man, took up the discussion.

"Ransom," he said, "it's not that you didn't do your duty. It's just that Sorry Corners has grown too big for two-man law enforcement. We know you've been kept busy, handling the toughs that keep coming into town. But with the gunfights in town and in the camps, it's not safe anymore for law-abiding citizens—"

"That's it," Bart Mingaloe broke in. He had lit up his cheroot and talked with it dangling from his lips. He eyed Dave Ransom mockingly. No love had ever been lost between the two. He said, "Accordin' we've decided tuh form a Vigilante committee—an' bring law an' order tuh this town."

Those Vigilantes of Sorry Corners had been formed to combat the lawless . . . yet the first man their guns singled out was Deputy Sheriff Dave Ransom!

DEUPTY RANSOM eyed the group coldly. "All yuh gents agreed, eh?"

A chorus of voices assented. Ransom glared at them. This was Bart Mingaloe's work, he knew. They listened to him because his company's mine was the richest in the section.

"Pears yore minds are made up," the lawman said. Then his voice was like a bullwhip. "But I ain't turnin' in my star! Leastwise not until the sheriff asks fer it!"

Mingaloe's face went granity. "Yuh're makin' a mistake, Ransom!" he growled. "We're prepared tuh take it!" He jerked his head. "All right, Scannel!"

Buck Scannel stepped forward. An ex-ranger, Scannel was a giant of a man, heavy-faced with his jaws shadowed with a blue-black beard. A scar on his left cheek gave him a sinister look. He had a barrel-like body, long arms, huge hands never far from his twin guns.

"Ransom," Scannel said gratingly, "I'm headin' the Vigilantes. I'm callin' yuh to turn in yore star!"

Ransom straightened, his leathery face turned to stone. His eyes were ice, and a pulse beat discernibly in his temples.

"Scannel," he said, low-voiced, "I'm warnin' yuh—I'm still th' law—"

He got no farther. A commotion sounded far down the dusty street. A four-horse team, racing madly, tore along the street. The stage careening wildly was half-hidden in yellow dust clouding up from the horses' hoofs. The crowd about the sheriff's office turned and surged forward, men shouting excitedly.

Dave Ransom followed, grim-faced. The stage had left Sorry Corners at seven o'clock that morning. At that hour in the afternoon it should have reached Payo Alto Junction on the Tucson railroad line. Something was wrong.

Ransom stepped into the street. He saw only one man was on the driver's seat. Two men had been on the perch when the stage departed. Old Jud Harris, the driver, and Lefty Grady, the guard.

The stage came to a violent halt. Men thronged around it. Ransom, slowly crossing to the big coach, saw that it was driven not by Harris or Grady but by Quirt Bayman, whom the storekeeper had called a camp robber.

Bayman climbed down. He was panting as hard as the team he had driven. A shabbily-dressed, bewhiskered, ratty little hombre, Quirt Bayman. He had never been

known to do a day's work in his life. His pale, watery eyes were furtive under the floppy brim of his shapeless hat.

"Hi, gents," he said loudly. "The stage was drygulched! Look inside!"

Buck Scannel elbowed through the crowd and jerked open one of the coach doors. Something bulky rolled out, and Scannel jumped back. The crowd got noisy, cursing. Dave Ransom pushed up and looked at the lifeless lump at Scannel's feet. It was Old Jud Harris, the stage driver, with a bullet-hole through his chest. His shirt front was patched with a big dried pool of blood.

Ransom looked into the coach with savage eyes. He reached in and tugged at something, pulled out the body of Lefty Grady, the guard. Grady had a bullet hole through his forehead. The deputy lay the second body on the ground.

The crowd was swelling and muttering angrily. Buck Scannel grabbed Ransom's arm and swung him about.

"The Vigilantes are takin' over," he rapped. "This is proof enough that thar's bin no law enforcement in this county. I'm warnin' yuh, hombre, tuh keep out o' this!"

Ransom threw off the Vigilante captain's grip. "Yuh want tuh have this out now, Scannel?" he rasped.

But Bart Mingaloe pushed between them. "No gunplay, gents," he ordered. "Nobody's gonna stop the Vigilantes." He jerked a glance at Scannel, and said, "Yuh round up the hombres that did this. The Lonesome Lou shipped twenty-five thousand dollars in dust on the stage this mornin'. I reckon it's gone."

"Shore it's gone!" It was Quirt Bayman's high-pitched voice. The ratty little man was puffed up with importance. He had never before been the center of so many eyes.

Dave Ransom swung on Bayman. "Where'd yuh find th' stage?"

Bayman's colorless eyes were crafty. "Over in Spearhead Gulch—'bout a mile from my cabin. It'd bin drove in a ravine—an' it was jest like I brought it in. Th' two bodies piled inside on th' floor."

"Spearhead Gulch?" the lawman said. "That's two miles off th' trail."

"Yep," Bayman said, grinning toothlessly. "Th' hold-up hombres musta drove it thar so it wouldn't be found fer a spell. But I found it!"

Buck Scannel rapped out orders. "Git shootin' irons, gents, an' saddle up! We'll

ride tuh the Gulch an' have a look-see. Mebbe we kin pick up th' trail o' them gun-slicks!"

A dozen men left the crowd with Scannel. Dave Ransom ignored them. He saw Doc McReady, a white-haired little man who was both physician and undertaker, and motioned for him. Doc and he carried Old Jud Harris's body to the undertaking establishment. Two other men brought Grady's corpse.

THE lawman built a smoke. "Git tuh work, Doc," he ordered, "an' tell me about them bullet-holes."

It was twenty minutes before Doc McReady offered an opinion. "Both men killed by a .45," he said. "The slugs ranged upwards—at a pretty sharp angle. I'd opine that the gunman stood beside the stage and shot square up into their faces."

The young lawman's eyes flickered with interest. "Thanks, Doc," he said. He turned and strode from the undertaking room.

He stepped out into the glaring sunlight. Groups of men stood at a number of places on the street, talking excitedly. Ransom saw grim, bitter glances cast his way. He started a slow walk down the street. Everytime he passed a group, the members of it grew silent. He knew what they were thinking and saying. That he had let lawlessness get uncontrollable.

Ransom shouldered open the batwing doors of the Longhorn Saloon, stepped through, let the doors swing closed. He stood and looked about the big room. Quirt Bayman was at the bar, a crowd about him. Somebody had bought the ratty camp robber a drink. Buck Mingaloe was talking in a loud voice.

"Twenty-five thousand dollars in gold dust!" he growled. "Nice haul fer those hombres. I suspected somethin' like that was gonna happen. Too bad we didn't form a Vigilante committee sooner. Sheriff Hodge is too old fer a lawman, that's why he's laid up now with lead in his back. An' that Ransom hombre hasn't the guts fer a law officer."

Dave Ransom stepped into the center of the room. Someone saw him, nudged Mingaloe. The mine manager turned. Fear danced brightly in his eyes for an instant then vanished. He looked narrowly at the deputy's stony face.

"Jest relatin' what th' whole town's thinkin'," he said mockingly.

"How many people knew about yore gold shipment?" Ransom demanded.

Mingaloe waved his hand in the air. "Everybody knows th' Lonesome Lou makes a shipment every week," he said. "Everybody but the deputy sheriff o' this county!" He laughed loudly at his own bit of humor. The men at the bar guffawed with him—Quirt Bayman loudest of all.

Ransom glared at the grubby camp robber. "Yuh, Bayman! Step along with me!"

Bayman's laughter froze. His pale eyes bulged. "Me? What fer?"

"I hanker tuh talk with yuh," the deputy said. "About that sack o' flour yuh stole from Midge Evers' store. Come along peaceable!"

"Yuh can't arrest me!" Bayman squealed. "Yuh're no deppity no more!"

"Yuh comin'?" Ransom's voice thundered.

Bayman's shifty eyes darted glances about for an avenue of escape. When he saw none he sidled over. "All right—hombre!" he muttered.

Bart Mingaloe stepped forward. "Let him go, Ransom," he growled. "I'll pay fer th' flour an' see that Midge don't prefer charges."

"I'm holdin' him until Midge withdraws his complaint," Ransom said.

Mingaloe's ruddy face hardened. "We'll have tuh take care o' yuh, Ransom—when Scannel an' the Vigilantes come back!"

"I'll be waitin'," Dave Ransom drawled.

He escorted the ratty little flour-thief to the sheriff's office and locked him in one of the cells at the rear of the building. Then he left the office, strode to the livery stable, and threw leather on his big gray gelding. He rode west along the stage trail.

The trail at first was blurred by many hoofs, but when it branched off onto the Payo Alto stage road it was clear and readable for trailwise eyes such as those of Dave Ransom. He saw where Jud Harris and Grady had taken the stage out, and where Quirt Bayman had brought it in with its grisly burden. Beside the wheelmarks were the hoofmarks of a dozen horses. Buck Scannel and his Vigilantes following the trail.

Ransom goaded the gelding with dull spurs. He galloped for a mile, then reined in. He saw where Quirt Bayman had cut the stage back onto the trail after bringing it away from distant Spearhead Gulch. Scannel and his mob had followed Bay-

man's trail. Ransom took the other—the one the stage had made going out.

He loped along beside the wheel marks for five miles then reined in again. He was in rough, rocky country, and he saw now where the stage had back-tracked. It cut off at this spot and headed toward the Gulch where Bayman had found it. Ransom leaned from the saddle and peered at the ground with keen, eager eyes.

Satisfaction lighted his eyes as he saw five sets of hoof marks. A rider had accompanied the stage on its journey to the Gulch. The rider had ridden close to the left of the four-horse team, evidently leading it.

Kneeing the gelding, Ransom followed the double-tracks of the stage. Half a mile brought him to the scene of the hold-up killing. Trackwise as an Indian, Dave Ransom read the story.

A lone rider had stopped the stage. The stop had been short. Then the stage had been turned about—for its journey to Spearhead Gulch. Driver Harris and Guard Grady had been dead by then, killed on this spot by a lone horseman.

Ransom looked about for the rider's tracks. He found them, followed them for a mile. They led through treacherous rockland, along a shortcut to the mining camps. They reached a creek, led into the water, and were lost. Ransom could not find them on the opposite bank.

Drumming hoofs sounded in the distance. The big lawman rode back and met Scannel and his Vigilantes. The riders drew up and faced Ransom.

Scannel's face with its scarred left cheek and blue-black jowls was ugly and scowling. "I thought I told yuh tuh keep out o' this, hombre!" he said savagely.

Ransom sat rigid in the saddle, his gunhand itching. He knew it was in the cards for Scannel and himself to have a gunplay showdown sooner or later.

"Anytime, Scannel," he said flatly. "Anytime yuh're ready!"

For a brief instant it looked as if the Vigilante captain would accept the challenge. His thick body tensed, his eyes glittered dangerously, his right hand started for his gun then halted.

"Later," he grated out. "Later, hombre!"

Ransom eased in the saddle, kneeed the gelding, and headed for the stage trail. Reaching the trail he started for town, then changed his mind and headed for Quirt Bayman's shack in the hills beyond Spearhead Gulch.

IT WAS a tumbled-down-log cabin, the west wall braced with poles cut from cottonwood saplings. There was a hole in the roof, and some of the upper chimney stones had fallen away. It was characteristic of its owner.

Ransom dismounted and entered. He was surprised. The interior of the cabin was clean and in order. The floor was swept clean. The bunk blankets were smooth, and the dishes on the table were clean. In a small cupboard near the fireplace was Bayman's small stock of food, including an unopened twenty-five-pound sack of flour. The lawman took out the flour, carried it with him when he left the cabin. He stuffed the sack into a saddle bag.

Citizens of Sorry Corners were still on the street, talking about the stage robbery and the double murder. Cowhands and mine-camp men were drifting in. Riding along the street, Dave Ransom caught no friendly glance. He reflected bitterly that Bart Mingaloe and Buck Scannel had done a thorough job in tearing his reputation to shreds.

He dismounted before Midge Evers' general store, took the sack of flour from the saddle bag, and entered the business place. His eyes iced a little when he saw Bart Mingaloe with the storekeeper.

Ransom said, "Midge, can yuh identify this sack of flour?"

The storekeeper scratched his bald head. "Looks like the one Quirt Bayman walked out with yesterday. I recollect that spot o' molasses on th' side. Yep, I identify it." Then he glanced at Mingaloe. And said, "But Mr. Mingaloe hyar was sayin' he'd pay fer the flour if I'd drop th' charge against Bayman."

"Suit yoreself," the lawman said.

Mingaloe took a silver dollar from his pocket and tossed it onto the counter. "Thar's yore money, Midge. I'll take the flour along an' give it tuh Bayman—when th' deputy releases him. Yuh ready, Ransom?"

Ransom nodded.

Quirt Bayman's ratty face wore a crafty grin when Ransom unlocked the cell door. He slipped out of the big lawman's reach, then gave a cackle of a laugh.

"Told yuh," he said, "yuh couldn't arrest me. Didn't I, Mister Mingaloe?"

"That's right, Bayman," the mine manager said. There was a lot of contrast between Mingaloe and the grubby little thief. Mingaloe was big and dressed like a dude

in his black suit, his gray Stetson, and his shiny, low-heeled, Eastern boots. It struck Dave Ransom as odd that the big man concerned himself so much with the shabbily-dressed Bayman.

"How about us amblin' over tuh th' Longhorn, Mister Mingaloe," Bayman said, "an' havin' a drink?"

"Shore," Mingaloe replied. "An' I'll stake yuh tuh a bottle of whiskey tuh take home with yuh—along with yore sack o' flour."

They walked out of the sheriff's office together. The puzzled deputy went to the door and watched them with narrowed, suspicious eyes. He built a smoke, and before he was done puffing at it he saw Quirt Bayman come out of the Longhorn Saloon, his sack of flour under one arm and a bottle of whiskey under the other. The shabby little thief hobbled on his crooked heeled boots to the livery stable, entered, and rode out five minutes later on a hired horse. Ransom's eyes widened in surprise.

Bayman hit the west trail which would take him home to his shack.

His dust hadn't settled on the street when Bart Mingaloe pushed through the saloon's batwings. He too went to the livery, and came out riding his dust-colored gelding. He rode west also, evidently for the Lonesome Lou mine.

Ransom dropped his smoke, ground it in the dust with his heel, and strode to the livery. Old Sam Pettie gave him a hostile look.

"Wal?" he demanded.

The lawman winced. The whole town seemed turned against him. He said, "Yuh let Quirt Bayman have a hoss. Did he pay yuh, or yuh goin' in fer charity?"

"Yuh got no authority tuh ask questions, Ransom," Old Sam snapped. "But I'll tell yuh. Bayman paid me spot cash fer hire of th' cayuse."

"Interestin'," Ransom said. "Never knew Bayman tuh have money before."

"Wal, he handed me three silver dollars—an' his money is as good as anybody's." The liveryman spat copiously of tobacco juice and turned away.

Ransom stepped out of the livery in time to see Buck Scannel and his Vigilantes ride in through the gathering dusk on lathered, dusty mounts. The band dismounted before the saloon and began to file in. Men came running, shouting questions about the stage ambushers. Dave Ransom knew the answers

without hearing them. The Vigilantes hadn't been able to find the hold-up men's trail.

Scannel came from the saloon with three men in ten minutes. They walked their horses to the livery, exchanged them for fresh animals. The ever-watching deputy saw them ride out the west trail. When they had disappeared, Ransom stepped into the saddle of the gray gelding and headed in the same direction. His eyes were keen, his face gravity, his lips smiling dangerously.

Darkness settled. Ransom headed the gelding off the trail, loping toward Spearhead Gulch and Quirt Bayman's cabin beyond. As he rode he eased his six-gun out of leather, spun the cylinder, tried the trigger action, and smiled grimly as he dropped the long-barreled .45 back into leather. The horse carried him through Spearhead Gulch and into the low hills beyond in an easy lope. When he sighted the square patch of yellow light that shone through the cabin window, he slowed to a walk.

The gelding's hoofs striking stones among the mesquite threw sharp sounds into the still night. Bayman must have heard the sounds, for his light went out. The deputy frowned at that. And then—

"Wha-ow! A bullet winged sharply past his head. With it had come the roar and the orange flash of the gun from the cabin door. Ransom hit the ground running, six-gun in his hand. He dived behind a clump of mesquite as a second and a third slug spurted up dust ahead of him. His horse shied in sudden fright and loped a hundred feet along the back trail.

THE lanky lawman flattened to the ground as a fourth shot tore through the mesquite above him. He licked suddenly dry lips, then cautiously raised the long barrel of his Colt and squeezed out two quick shots. The black vertical oblong of the doorway flamed with gunfire from twin guns. Lethal lead ripped through the brush. Ransom flung himself over and over in a life-saving roll, ended belly-down ten feet away behind a tree stump. He snapshot once at the spot from where those guns had blazed. Echoing his shot, he heard a crash as a heavy object fell, then nothing.

He waited for the space of thirty seconds, then raised himself from behind the stump, waited again, breathless, with gun ready. No further shots crashed out at him. The shack was as black and still as a tomb. Excitement shot quivers through his muscles.

He moved toward the doorway, his stomach pulled taut by fear of a surprise shot from within as he exposed himself.

No shot came. He reached the door, halted, listened, heard nothing. He stepped into the blackness. He let his breath out in a sharp gasp of relief, then felt in his pocket for matches. He reached out to strike one on the wall, but halted to listen again. The drumming of hoofs sounded sharply—for a brief interval—then died away in the distance. Ransom muttered an oath. His dry-gulcher had escaped through a back window to a horse hidden somewhere beyond the rear of the shack. He struck the match, and his face hardened at what he saw in its flickering glow. Ignoring the picture for a moment, he stooped and picked the oil lamp from the floor. The wick took the flame from his match.

He held the lamp high and looked about. Quirt Bayman, the grubby little thief, lay on his back and his ratty face sticky with blood from a bullet hole in his forehead.

"Do no more thievin'," Ransom muttered.

He looked further about the room. He saw the open window through which the killer had escaped. And in the center of the room was the results of the crash he had heard after the exchange of shots. The killer, fleeing in the dark, had overturned the table. Bayman's supper preparations were strewn over the floor.

Strips of bacon had spilled from an iron skillet, and beans from a pot. And—the lawman's eyes widened. A wad of dough, the size of a man's two fists, was tramped flat on the floor by a heavy footstep. The footprint remained etched in the dough. Nearby was a spilled sack of flour, the same sack that Bayman had stolen from Midge Evers' general store.

Ransom stooped and prodded the dough with a finger. "Tough as saddle leather," he muttered. "Some biscuits Bayman was makin'!"

He placed the lamp on the floor. Across the cabin he saw a small flat wooden box with a lid. He got the box and transferred the dough into it. He fitted the lid, put the box under his left arm, bent to blow out the lamp flame. A voice snarled:

"What's this, hombre?"

Ransom whirled, his right hand streaking toward his gun-butt then halting an inch from it as he saw the newcomer had him covered.

Buck Scannel's thick body filled the door-

way. The .45 in his hand bored at the lawman's stomach.

"Wal—talk!" he ordered.

Ransom's spread-fingered hand was still an inch from his gun. His face was granularity. He realized that the showdown he had known was in the cards was near at hand. And Scannel had the drop on him.

He said, "Scannel, I'm still the law in this county!"

The Vigilante captain cursed. "Not no more, hombre. Not no more!"

"Holster yore gun, Scannel," the deputy snapped, his voice dead. "I'm tellin' yuh I'm th' law, an' right now I'm goin' after th' murderer o' th' stage driver and guard—an th' killer o' Quirt Bayman. I got th' evidence tuh prove his guilt hyar in this box!"

Scannel's gun did not falter. "If yuh got evidence," he said, "yuh're gonna turn it over tuh th' Vigilantes—which means me!"

"I reckon yuh're wrong, Scannel."

"I reckon not," the Vigilante said, his glittering eyes never leaving Ransom's face. "An' I reckon I'm right about a lot o' other things—such as Quirt Bayman lyin' thar murdered, and yuh sneakin' from his shack with a box under yore arm. It shore looks plumb suspicious tuh me!"

"Yuh suggestin' that I gunned Bayman?" Ransom snapped.

"Yep! An' I'm arrestin' yuh fer it!" Scannel said. His eyes became mere slits, his grin was wolfish. "Mebbe yuh're resistin' arrest," he went on. "In that case, I reckon I can beat yuh tuh th' draw—in th' performance o' my duty!"

He laughed raspingly. Ransom knew Scannel planned to kill him, and his mouth felt suddenly dry, as if full of alkali dust. He had a split second more to live, and he meant to make that split second count as a desperate bid for escape. He was a sudden whirlwind of action. His right leg shot out, the toe of his boot striking the oil lamp and throwing it across the cabin. The flame went instantly out, and thick blackness closed in.

Simultaneously, Ransom's gun leaped out and its roar blended with Scannel's shot. But the lawman was whirling, leaping sideways so that he was an elusive target, and the movement ruined his own aim as well as Scannel's. His triggered .45 roared in vicious encore to the Vigilante's crashing gun. Gun flame stabbed the darkness, and the smell of gun smoke stung Ransom's nostrils. Scannel had shifted position, too,

backing from the doorway so that he was partially protected by the cabin wall. He kept firing, and one of his slugs burned the lawman's left side like a branding iron.

Ransom felt a sudden fountain of blood spring warm and moist below his ribs. He gritted his teeth against the slug's shock, then lunged for the door. He stumbled over the door sill, dropping the box he had clung to from the start of the battle. His lunge carried him against Scannel's bulky figure. The hot breath of an exploding gun fanned his neck. Blindly, he lashed out with his gun at the man's face. He felt and heard it crash against solid flesh.

THEY went down together, Scannel falling backwards and the deputy on top of him. Ransom flailed with his gun as the Vigilante's arms grabbed him in a powerful grip. The long barrel of the Colt struck Scannel squarely across the right temple, making an ugly, blood-oozing cut. The breath came out of the man in a gasp. His body went limp under Dave Ransom.

Swaying groggily when he got to his feet, Ransom felt on the ground for the wooden box. He found it, then turned to look for his horse. The gelding was now calmly grazing a short distance from the shack. Scannel's roan was a little farther away. Ransom rounded them both up.

Buck Scannel was groaning and struggling to his feet when Ransom returned with the horses. He stared savagely at the gun the lawman leveled at him.

"Yuh dirty dry-gulcher!" Scannel raged.

"Shut up, Scannel!" Ransom snapped. "An' git on yore hoss!"

Scannel climbed sullenly into the saddle. He cast a glance at his gun on the ground.

"Git goin'!" Ransom ordered. "An' if yuh make a break I'll kill yuh!"

They rode through the darkness toward the distant town. Ransom kept the nose of the gray gelding close to the roan's rump. They rode out of the hills, then through a boulder-strewn, brush-tangled canyon. At the bottle-neck end of the canyon, Ransom called a halt.

He caught the sounds of riders. He was about to warn Scannel to make no sound, when the vigilante plunged roweled spurs into his mount's flanks. The roan bounded forward. Cursing at the sudden move, Ransom spurred his gelding to overtake the roan. He came alongside quickly and attempted to slug Scannel with his gun, but the fleeing man threw up his arm and kept

the blow from reaching his head. Jerking his roan to the left, Scannel made a desperate play to escape.

His voice rang out in a wolfish yell: "Git him, hombres! Gun him down!"

Ransom gave his attention now to the oncoming riders. There were three, and he recognized them as the trio who had accompanied Scannel from town at dusk. They were on him instantly, with blazing guns. He spurred the gelding again and headed at them, his own gun spurting flame.

One rider catapulted from the saddle, and by then the other two were past him. He reined in, whirled his mount about so that the two could not take him from behind. He saw that Scannel was streaking for Sorry Corners.

The two riders were wary. They had reined in and now sat on their horses a hundred feet away, guns ready. Ransom muttered a curse in his throat. Buck Scannel was getting away, and he couldn't follow with two gunslick toughs at his back.

"Listen, yuh hombres!" he shouted savagely. "I'm still sheriff's deputy in this hyar county. I'm on my way tuh arrest the murderer o' three men, th' hombre that stole th' gold shipment. I'm warnin' yuh, don't interfere while I'm doin' my duty!"

The two riders made no answer. They were shadowy shapes in the night. Ransom kneeed the gelding, swung about, and loped away. He darted a glance over his shoulder. The two riders were following, but not too close. He pushed the gelding and stretched his lead into a safer distance. Far faster than Scannel's roan, it would have run down the other horse in another mile.

As it was, Ransom rode into Sorry Corners thirty seconds after the Vigilante captain. He saw Scannel's blowing, lathered roan in front of the Longhorn Saloon. He jerked his horse to a halt, reached into the saddle bag for the wooden box which contained the damning evidence that would hang a man, then swung to the ground. He strode into the saloon.

Scannel was at the bar, excitedly whispering to Bart Mingaloe. The two men faced about at the lawman's entry. Scannel was unarmed. Mingaloe's twin guns were beneath his coat.

"Mingaloe!" Ransom's voice lashed out.

The crowd in the saloon turned as a man. Bart Mingaloe's ruddy face was swept briefly by fear, then went bland. He took a step forward. He still wore the black suit, gray Stetson, and low-heeled boots.

"What do yuh want, Ransom?" he snapped.

"Yuh, Mingaloe! Fer three murders. Fer stealin' th' shipment of gold off'n th' stage this mornin'!" the lawman said.

Fear came again to the mine manager's face. "Yuh're loco! I wouldn't be fool enough tuh steal my employer's gold!"

"Yuh are jest that sort o' fool," Ransom said. "I got th' evidence hyar in this box."

Buck Scannel stepped forward. "Ransom, if yuh got evidence like that, yuh'll turn it over tuh the Vigilantes," he said.

"The Vigilantes are through, I reckon," Ransom said. "I'm all th' law as is needed hyarabouts. It was a good idea—if it had worked. Mingaloe robbed the stage—and planned tuh rob it again often, I figger—an' yuh with yore Vigilantes were gonna make a big show o' huntin' but not findin' 'em."

ELI JERGINs, the pink-faced banker, stepped forward from the crowd.

"Ransom," he said, "you're accusing one of our leading citizens. If you don't have sufficient evidence, it'll be too bad for you."

Ransom didn't take his eyes from Bart Mingaloe. He said grimly, "I suspected Mingaloe from the start. Investigatin' the stage robbery, I saw that th' gunslick had stopped the stage. Old Jud Harris, th' driver, never stopped fer nobody when he carried gold—unless mebbe the man who'd shipped the gold. Which in this case means Mingaloe."

"Next, I learned from Doc McReady that both Harris and Guard Grady had been shot from below," Ransom went on. "The killer was standing beside the stage, talkin' with 'em. Mebbe that wasn't good evidence. But I found more. Quirt Bayman knew somethin'. Any hombre with horse sense could see that. An' Mingaloe played up to him. Bought him a sack o' flour, a bottle of whiskey, gave him money tuh hire a cayuse. Why? I rode out tuh Bayman's shack, found him murdered—"

"Mebbe yuh know somethin' about that," Mingaloe snapped. "Mebbe, gents, this hombre's tryin' tuh frame me tuh shield himself."

"Let me do th' talkin'," Dave Ransom ordered. "The killer of Quirt Bayman left his footprint in a wad o' dough which happened tuh fall tuh the floor." He handed the box he carried to Eli Jergins. "Take a look-see, Banker, an' tell everybody whose track that is."

He said, "Only man I know who wears

them low-heeled boots is Bart Mingaloe."

Mingaloe rasped out a curse. "Yuh're all loco!" he raged.

Ransom said, "Yuh shouldn't have been so generous, Mingaloe, an' give Bayman that sack o' flour. He mixed that dough with th' flour yuh paid fer. But I figger yuh had tuh treat Bayman handsome. He saw yuh rob th' stage and was blackmailin' yuh—"

He got no further. Mingaloe went for his guns. They came out of leather blazing. Ransom's draw matched the killer's to a split second. He felt a slug crash into his left shoulder, felt himself half spun around by the impact. But the shot was a lucky break. He saw Mingaloe fold up with a bullet through his chest. And in being whirled about, he saw two men pushing through the swinging doors with guns ready.

They were the two riders who had trailed him in. Scannel's toughs. They opened fire, but Ransom leaped to the side. His gun roared three times like triple streaks of lightning. The one rider collapsed with a slug through his leg. The other threw up his hands.

Ransom whirled. Mingaloe was on the floor, sprawled on his face. Buck Scannel was picking up one of the fallen man's guns. He straightened, triggering the gun. The bullet struck Ransom's leg and upset him. He fired as he went down and saw Scannel's body give a shudder as the slug drove into his chest. The wounded lawman was swallowed by blackness.

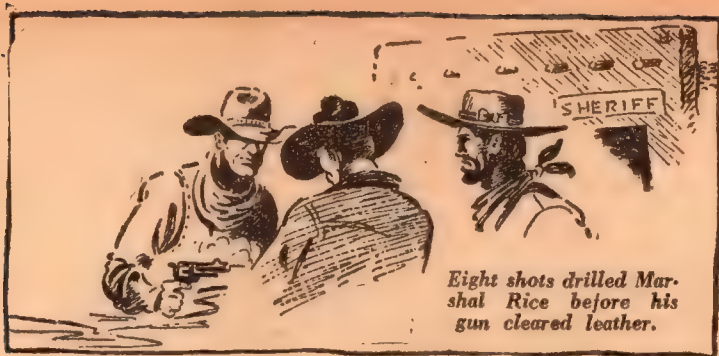
DOC McREADY was working on him when he came to. "Don't move, Dave," the doctor said. "Got tuh patch yuh up—so yuh can do some more law enforcin'. Citizens o' Sorry Corners have sorta changed their minds about th' Vigilantes. Hyar! Keep still. . . . Got tuh cut th' lead outa yore shoulder!"

"Mingaloe cash in his chips?" Ransom asked later.

"Yep," said Doc McReady. "An' confessed considerable before doing so. Yuh were right on all scores, except about why he killed Bayman. Th' old thief saw the hold-up. He watched whar Mingaloe hid the gold. Then later he went an' stole it an' cached it under the floor o' his shack—"

Footsteps sounded, then a rap on the door. Doc McReady said, "Hyar comes a delegation o' citizens tuh ask yuh to run fer sheriff, come election."

Dave Ransom grinned. "Let 'em in, Sawbones," he said. "Let 'em in."



HEEL OF A KILLER

by H. R. MARSHALL

At noon they'd meet . . . One was a killer whose guns had blasted many a gunslick down that last dim trail of no return, and the other was a cowpoke, with sight so bad he couldn't hit a target ten feet in front of him . . . and at noon they'd meet!

'BREED STEVE was a killer by desire, instinct and training. He was one of those who tingle when they kill, swell with tremendous satisfaction, feel elated beyond sanity in the mere killing.

'Breed proved that during his first half-hour in Gray Rock Center, proved it by calling out Marshal Pete Rice from The Mint bar and shooting him down.

It was a fair challenge and a fair fight, but those long brown hands of 'Breed Steve were a split-second too fast in reaching the double holsters and up again, too fast triggering his six-shooters at the marshal, who was no amateur himself.

Eight of the twelve shots drilled Marshal Rice in the middle before his own guns had cleared leather. The marshal had no time and really no cause to be ashamed of his fatal failure. Better men than he had wilted in front of 'Breed Steve's hands, those flashing hands faster than a magician's; better men than he had folded up while the black button eyes of the killer went shiny wet with sadistic pleasure.

Funny draw, had 'Breed Steve. The men of Gray Rock Center noted it. He carried his two guns centered on his belly, and he crossed his hands and wrists before he drew them. Cross-handed draw—who ever

heard of that? Of course that way one wrist steadied the other, both hands absorbed the recoil of each—but a cross-handed draw, even if the guns spit before they seemed free? Only if one were a 'Breed Steve with hands which licked out like the fangs of a snake would one try a draw like—

"Now I'll run this tin-can patch called a town for a while," announced 'Breed Steve, reloading his hot guns. He stood there, short, squat and swarthy, his feet planted apart as if he owned the very earth he stood on, his black eyes flashing contempt and challenge. "Never did like Rice anyway, not since he pistol-whipped a friend of mine out of town last spring. Any objections?"

NO OBJECTIONS were offered. Word of 'Breed Steve had preceded him. Warning had come down from Mono county, up from San Bernardino, in from Mojave, together with a list of the 'Breed's victims, a list which grew in each re-telling. Generally, of course, he was called Half-Breed Steve—but not in his earshot.

"So there's no objections to my takin' over," said 'Breed Steve. "I wisht there was some objections. Just for fun. . . . Now as to orders. Ten percent cut from

The Mint. Okay? All the marshal's fees, and if there ain't enough we'll find more. Free drinks, anywhere. . . . For sleepin' and reg'lar eatin' I'll take the Terrapin Rancho. Passed it on my way in, and the chuck house sure looked good, and the bunkhouse under that lone cottonwood . . . okay? Boys, who's settin' up the drinks for the new marshal? Hell, you ain't mournin' Rice, are you? He had it comin' for a year. That's the way he got his job, and that's the way he lost it. A man who can't pour bullets any faster'n he could—hell!"

The men of Gray Rock Center bought the drinks, but they didn't look into the eyes of the killer or into the eyes of each other. As a matter of fact, most of them went to bed in the dark that night. Each was afraid he might look into a mirror and see the eyes of a coward staring back at him. But 'Breed Steve, after all—who would dare challenge a killer like that? Suicide, that's all.

LONG MAC MACIVER tossed in his narrow bunk against the wall of the Terrapin Rancho bunkhouse, tossed and fretted and worried sleeplessly. The cause of his worry was less than three feet away, within arm's reach, sleeping peacefully in the next bunk—"Breed Steve.

Long Mac propped his graying head on his hand and stared across at the 'Breed. He could barely make out the fellow's features in the dim light from the shaded kerosene lamp; but there seemed a smirk of utter satisfaction on the killer's face and he slept the placid sleep of one who knows he has done a good day's work. Yes, the killer was sleeping more peacefully than any other man in the Terrapin bunkhouse. Perhaps the consciences of the others troubled them, the realization that they were all afraid of one man, and a half-breed at that.

It would be easy, thought Long Mac MacIver, for him to pounce on that squat little form in the next bed, close his long fingers on that swarthy neck and choke the fellow to death. For that matter, it would be easy for any man in Gray Rock Center to waylay the 'Breed, to dry-gulch him. But that was not according to the code, that would be murder and a man would have to pay the penalty for it. No, to get rid of 'Breed Steve some man must stand up before him and shoot it out, draw for draw, shot for shot. No man in the

entire settlement would dare to do that, least of all Long Mac MacIver.

The old cowboy dropped his head on his arm and lay there tensely, his eyes watching the flickering shadows on the rafters of the ceiling. Yes, Long Mac MacIver would be the last man in the world to stand up before the flashing hands and spitting guns of 'Breed Steve. The mere idea would make the townspeople laugh. They laughed at Long Mac MacIver anyway, laughed because he was so tall and thin, with a body that seemed split up past the middle and arms which dangled to his knees, laughed most of all because he was always so awkward, tumbling over his own feet, sliding off the back of his own mount, bumping into cholla cactus or doors or whatever was in his way.

Long Mac MacIver had always accepted the jibes goodnaturedly. After all, these men, even his fellow cowboys, didn't know that his faded blue eyes were so short-sighted that an object thirty yards away was only a dim blotch, so short-sighted that opened doors seemed to leap at him and chairs to spring up in front of his stumbling feet. Of course the major domo knew it; that was the reason Long Mac was never given a bad bronch' to bust or a dogie to pull from the quicksand or any other real cowboy's jobs; all Long Mac could do was to ride fences and with his pliers repair the gaps he found. . .

"Yep," mused Long Mac, lying in his bunk, "it's plumb ridiculous to think of anyone fightin' it out with this 'Breed, most of all me. It almost makes me laugh. Almost. But someone's got to get him. Right now the whole town's bullied, scared, and there ain't a man who will stand up before 'Breed. And someone's got to do it or there ain't no self-respect left. . . . The fellow must have a weakness. Sure, that's it. He must have a weakness. Maybe if I watch and watch I can find—"

Eventually Long Mac went to sleep, but he was the first one awake in the morning. As he pulled on his flannel shirt and chamois vest he watched 'Breed Steve awaken, yawn and stretch himself.

"How's chuck?" yelled 'Breed Steve. "Flop my eggs and cook the toast hard and crunchy. That's the way I like it and I gener'ly get what I like."

Long Mac walked step for step with 'Breed Steve to the plank table, watched him as he ate, watched each motion, peering

with those near-sighted blue eyes. After breakfast he volunteered to take the 'Breed on a tour of the ranch.

"Sure," said 'Breed Steve, "I got to know the lay of the land. And the cayuses. The fast ones. Sometimes I need a fast horse and a game one for a getaway. Come on, Long Mac. Show me the lowdown."

Beyond the smaller corral something happened. Long Mac and 'Breed Steve were walking side by side and Long Mac was making himself as agreeable as he could. The two were discussing the respective merits of mustangs and the heavier horses with a touch of Percheron in them. Suddenly 'Breed Steve leaped in the air, turning and twisting in his leap. Those marvelous hands of his flashed to his holster and out again. Twelve shots sounded like the taps of a riveter, twelve shots poured into the ground.

LONG MAC peered closely. A rattlesnake was squirming and writhing, despite the fact that it had been shot through in three or four places.

"Pshaw," said Long Mac, "it's only a rattler. Only a young rattler. Three years old by its buttons." He looked up at 'Breed Steve and he recoiled.

The face of the 'Breed was no longer brown; it was green. His black eyes were bulging with horror and fear and his hands remained crossed on his belly, pressing it hard. He moved to the nearest creosote bush and bent over it. Then he was sick, actively, nauseatingly sick.

Long Mac watched it all and into his faded blue eyes came a glint of interest and speculation.

"Damn it!" cursed 'Breed Steve, coming back from the bush. "Those rattlers! I can't stand 'em. They make me sick. They're awful. God, how I hate 'em!"

Long Mac nodded. He seemed to be smiling a kind of internal smile, a wise smile. So the 'Breed was vulnerable after all; he had a hole in his armor. It wasn't that the killer thought snakes were horrible; it was more than that—he was distinctly, sickeningly afraid of them. Yes, a hole in his armor. Wasn't there an old geezer named Achilles who was safe to all mortal attack except for one heel? Something about his mother holding him by one heel when she dropped him in magic water. And wasn't the old geezer, Achilles, finally downed because some wise mortal shot him

in that vulnerable heel with a poisoned arrow or something?

Well, 'Breed Steve seemed to have an Achilles heel—and the name of it was—rattlesnakes.

That afternoon Long Mac didn't ride fences. He sat on the edge of his bunk, his long legs sprawled loosely, his arms dangling; but his little blue eyes were intense and his face twisted as he forced his thinking apparatus to its limit. At last he got up and walked to the chuck house.

He gazed first at Ramon Chico, the plump little Mexican cook, then up at the alarm clock on the shelf above the range.

"Clock keep good time, Ramon?" he asked.

The little Mexican grinned. "Sure, he keep good time. You set alarm at five and burrrr the alarm go off at five. Every morning he get me up on the second."

"Good," said Long Mac. "I was only wondering what time it was."

He ambled back to the bunkhouse, but that afternoon while Ramon Chico was taking his siesta the alarm clock disappeared from the shelf over the range.

'BREED STEVE was lording it over the men in The Mint. He was not the quiet type of killer, cold and silent, but the noisy man who liked to talk of his own prowess, of his own black deeds as if each re-telling of them were a renewed pleasure. ". . . and so this Monte Jack comes around the corner of the Golden Nugget with his hand on his gun butts but I was too quick for him and—"

"That so, half-breed?" interrupted a voice, a mild, speculative voice. "Plenty brave, ain't you, half-breed?"

For a moment the men at the bar were frozen with utter surprise, surprise in which horror was heavy. Slowly they turned to face the speaker. Long Mac stood there, his hands flat on the bar, his face turned toward 'Breed Steve, his little eyes peering near-sightedly.

The hands of 'Breed Steve had flashed to his holsters. But he couldn't pull his guns, not on a man whose hands were flat on the bar. His swarthy face had turned a shade lighter. "What'd you call me?" He forced each word out slowly.

"Half-breed," said Long Mac. He hoped no one noticed that his voice trembled just a little. "Half-breed, I called you. You

are, ain't you? Half coyote and half rattlesnake. That's what I think."

Again there was that long moment of frozen silence.

"Well?" said Long Mac.

"Breed Steve turned and spat on the floor. 'When will it be?' he asked. 'Right now? Outside?'"

"Naw," said Long Mac MacIver. "My eyes ain't as good as they used to be. Tomorrow noon would be a good time. When there ain't any shadows."

The men of Gray Rock Center stared at this long gangling elderly cowboy, the awkward likeable old fellow who could hardly fork a horse and who bumped into open doors. Had he suddenly gone crazy? Was he committing suicide on purpose? The gazes were speculative but they were also sad. Yes, they realized now, they had all always liked the long-legged old geezer and now, well, it was just too bad.

"Just to make it fair," said Long Mac, "I think Buck Harris might go out and draw two lines in the alkali dust out front. Say about twenty yards apart. Then tomorrow, just at noon, the half-breed will come down the street from the east and I'll come up from the west. He can come out of the blacksmith's shop and I'll come out of the door of the house where my niece, Jennie, lives. Then we walk up the street toward each other and either of us can start for the holsters at any time. That's all accordin' to rules, ain't it?" The voice of Long Mac was anxious.

Again 'Breed Steve spat on the floor. "Sure," he said, "anything's okay with me. Only you come out of the house with your hands at your side and I come out of the blacksmith's shop the same way and we walk toward each other, 'til one of us makes a move."

"That's right," agreed Long Mac. "Buck, why don't you go out and draw them lines in the dust, eh?"

THE grapevine telegraph of the desert spread the news with that strange, lightning-like rapidity with which it always works. Gray Rock Center became the focal point of desert dwellers, cowboys, prospectors. Long before mid-morning, jiggling ponies and creaking buckboards brought in the desert dwellers. All morning the inrush continued. Excitement!

The great 'Breed Steve had been challenged by Long Mac, challenged to an old-

fashioned Western shooting duel, a duel in which the man fastest on the draw, the truest in his aim, would win. Of course old MacIver wouldn't have a chance in hell but—more excitement, more buzzing of lips and tongues, more men lining the two sides of the short main street in Gray Rock Center.

At five minutes before twelve silence settled over that little desert community. From the blacksmith's shop to the third house up the street the paths—which were called sidewalks—were lined with men. Of course the greatest number were at The Mint bar.

"... 'Breed Steve's already in the blacksmith's shop. I seen him loosenin' his guns in his holsters and—..."

"Long Mac's havin' a cup of coffee in his niece's kitchen. Reckon he'll need that coffee and reckon he better say goodbye to—"

Three minutes to twelve. 'Breed Steve appeared first, walking out from the blacksmith's shop to the center of the road, the calcium-white road upon which the sun glared with a beating intensity that made eyes ache, and raised layer after layer of heat waves, shimmering and distorting all things.

"There's Long Mac!"

The whisper ran up and down the street, crossed over and buzzed most loudly of all in front of The Mint bar. That, after all, was the grandstand. Right in front the two lines were drawn only twenty yards apart deeply in the dust. Of course the men standing there ran a slight chance of being hit by a stray bullet, but who would reckon such a danger when they could be in the front row of a thing like this? Here was something that they could talk about for days, weeks, months, something they could tell their nephews and grandsons about.

Yes, Long Mac MacIver had appeared, moving slowly away from the house of his niece, blinking in the glare of the sun, squinting his little blue eyes. The two men, the killer and the cowboy, were approaching each other slowly, down that glaring white road. Both had their hands at their sides, each watched the figure of the other approaching.

Suddenly 'Breed Steve stood stock still in the middle of the road. He threw back his head and laughed aloud. He turned to the men on the sidewalk.

"Look at the old buzzard!" he shouted. "So scared he can hardly stand up." He raised his hands to his lips and shouted

down the street. "Hey, you old turkey buzzard, pull your guns and take a shot at me. Look, I'll turn my back so you won't be scared."

True to his word, 'Breed Steve turned his back on the gangling figure which was approaching, stood there, a fair target while he laughed and joked with the spectators.

Then Long Mac raised his voice. "I don't shoot a man in the back," he yelled. "Come on like a man and don't go skulkin' back there like the stinkin' coyote you are!"

Once more Long Mac MacIver hoped with all the power of his being that the men of Gray Rock Center didn't catch that faint tremor in his voice. He hoped, too, they wouldn't notice how weak his knees were and how his hands were shaking. For 'Breed Steve was coming on now, plodding down the road, planting each foot firmly, solidly, and his swarthy, hard face seemed to project far in front of him and his black killer's eyes were unblinking, watching for the faintest suggestion of a move by his opponent's hands to the holster.

The men were less than a hundred yards apart now, less than ninety, down to seventy.

"Make your move!" shouted 'Breed Steve. "Make your move, you buzzard, and I'll show you what lightnin' is."

Long Mac made no move with his hands and his feet had almost ceased their forward progress. Those on the sidewalk next to him saw the beads of perspiration on his long thin face, saw that his graying hair was shiny with perspiration; they saw, too, that his eyes were blinking and they noted particularly that he carried his head to one side as if he were listening, listening intently to some sound they couldn't hear.

"Oh, God," Long Mac was breathing to himself. "Let it go off now. Let it go off now! I can't move another step. I can't! I can't. Oh, God, I don't want to be killed! I'm just tryin' to rid this town of a killer, I'm just tryin' to give this town back its self-respect and it ain't right that I should be killed for it. Oh, God, let it go off—"

THE men were barely fifty yards apart when it happened. The hands of 'Breed Steve flashed to his holster faster than they had ever done in his fast-drawing life. Up came the guns and out of the leather, in that strange cross-handed draw. This was the moment. This was the moment of death. Death for old Long Mac.

But the 'Breed's six-shooters were not pointed at Long Mac. They were pointed at

the ground ten feet to 'Breed Steve's right, pointed at a little mound of alkali dust. Into that mound the guns emptied themselves, into it and a little coil of rope which was resting on it. The face of 'Breed Steve had turned yellow and now it was green. Both hands of 'Breed Steve folded on his stomach and he was ready to retch.

Long Mac MacIver fired then. But he didn't shoot at 'Breed Steve. Probably it would have done no good if he had aimed, for the killer was only a blur in front of him. So he emptied his revolvers in the air over the killer's head. And then sudden rage seized Long Mac, rage at that retching green-faced man who had come into town, bullied the town, made the men of the town lose their self-respect.

Long Mac charged. There was one other way to fight, a way just as American as the gun duel. The bare fist was a great weapon, properly wielded.

Long Mac wielded it expertly. His first blow started from the ground and started upward. As it hit on the point of 'Breed Steve's jaw it twisted a little. 'Breed Steve's feet seemed to leave the ground as he fell backwards.

All the time Long Mac was muttering strange things to himself. He stooped down and took 'Breed Steve by the ankles; he dragged him down the dusty road and the killer's head made a deep track in the alkali dust and sometimes it bumped on rocks and once it got tangled in a branch of mesquite and had to be jerked through it. Still Long Mac strode ahead, pulling that little bumping figure behind him like a bronch' pulling a dogie from the quicksand.

At the end of town Long Mac stopped. He summoned his remaining strength and began to swing the limp figure of 'Breed Steve, the killer, in an arc, revolving it around him like a hammer-thrower revolves a hammer. It was hard work and he staggered as that chunky body made a complete circle around his own. When he had it whirling fast enough he let go, and 'Breed Steve, the killer, catapulted through the air and down the bed of a dry wash.

Long Mac MacIver brushed his hands together as if he were wiping off dirt.

"He'll never dare show his face in this town again," muttered Long Mac to no one in particular. "He'll never dare to come within a hundred miles of here again. They'd laugh him to death."

He was trudging back up the center of the road again, struggling through men who

had rushed out to greet him, to pat him on the back, to grab his hand, some just to touch this marvelous fellow. Long Mac ignored them all and plodded ahead, still muttering. He reached the first line drawn in front of The Mint bar. He turned and looked at the little pile of dust beside the mark, stared at the little hump and a coil of rawhide lariat which had been arranged on it in queer concentric circles. The rope had a metal clasp on it, too, and there in the dust the whole thing looked at first glance remarkably like a snake. Long Mac stared at it and grinned weakly.

He was awfully tired. The strain had almost been too much for his old heart. So he sat down suddenly in the dust.

His long brown hands began to paw at that mound of dust. Like a dog uncovering a bone he uncovered a small cardboard box, pulled it to him. He took off the cover.

"Here," he said, holding up a glistening object, "this is Ramon's alarm clock. Take it back to him. Tell him the bell is in my

bunk and he can take off this paper so that—"

Just then the alarm clock, shaken by Long Mac, began to vibrate. The little hammer, which generally beat on the bell, was beating on a piece of yellow wrapping paper, and the sound which came out was so startling that the desert men all jumped. That, they knew, was the exact sound of a rattlesnake.

"A rattler, eh?" crowed Long Mac, swaying back and forth on his hips. "Nice rattler, brave rattler, wonderful rattler. And what it did to 'Breed Steve! Probably you guys never heard of an old geezer named Achilles who had a heel—"

BUT the men of Gray Rock Center decided the strain had been too much for Long Mac and he was becoming maudlin, so they picked him up and carried him on their shoulders. They planted him on the bar of The Mint and ordered the first round of drinks in his honor.



THRILL TO THE ACTION OF THE WEST WHEN IT WAS WILD!

READ

DOUBLE ACTION WESTERN

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WESTERN ACTION

SMASHING WESTERN

ACTION-PACKED WESTERN

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FAMOUS WESTERN

WESTERN YARNS

COWBOY SHORT STORIES



ON SALE AT ALL GOOD NEWSSTANDS!



SADDLEMATES NEEDED FOR BRIMSTONE RANGE

by JAMES ROURKE

Those hard-fighting, lead-slinging Clergs had damned the sheriff of Coyote Pass as a fancy-pants pretty-boy dude . . . until he proved to them that the man behind the guns, and not the clothes, make the lawman!

LIKE a tornado, the Clergs and their troop of hard-bitten lead-slingers came roaring out of Paintrock Canyon, and into Coyote Pass, just before sundown. At the head of the thundering cavalcade rode the four Clerg brothers: Black Gran, Beanpole, Flint, and Dogie.

In a whirl of dust and flying gravel, the rough, hard-riding outfit reached the west end of Main Street. There sounded wild yells from twelve throats, and then pistol shots. Window panes and lamp globes smashed; fell in showers of tinkling glass. Bullets ripped into planking and whistled along the winding street.

People ran for shelter like rabbits scurrying to burrows. Inside the stores and the dives of the town, chairs and tables banged; boots scruffed and pounded.

Some of the inmates of the places were springing to windows to see what was happening on the street. Others were ducking behind various articles of furniture.

All up and down the town could be heard frantic shouts to the effect that it was time to scoot; that the Clergs and their tough Rafter Arrow C outfit were riding wild into Coyote Pass.

For a full minute there was pandemo-

nium as the cyclonic cavalcade rode up and down the town; pounding, plunging, shooting, yelling like savages on a wild rampage. And then Black Gran, eldest of the Clerg quartet, assembled his riders into a compact group and swung them toward a place of business named the Longhorn.

Inside the Longhorn the only person who had not ducked to some place of more or less safety, was a young fellow who stood at the bar, sipping a glass of beer.

He was dressed in a rather new, rather gaudy range outfit. A pair of ivory-buffed six-guns on ornately studded belts hung at his thighs. Beneath his well-formed nose was a small, blonde mustache, the points of which were waxed into spikes. This young stranger looked very much the dude cowboy.

"What's wrong?" he casually asked the barkeep, as that anxious individual rose from beneath the bar and peered through a fly-specked window at the twelve men, who were quitting leather at the hitch-rail in front of the Longhorn.

"It's the Clerg outfit, toughest band of gun-rollers this side of Rio."

"Outlaws?"

The barkeep sent a furtive glance about

the room, at the men who now were emerging from various places of concealment. Evidently he was unwilling to say anything further to the discredit of the hard-bitten outfit.

"The four Clerg brothers own the Rafter Arrow C spread," he finally said.

"Why all the ridin' wild?"

"Tomorrow is Election Day. People are coming in tonight so's to witness all the show. Reckon the Clergs are just serving public notice they aim to rule the poll. They swore they would."

The dudish-looking cowboy did not know that the Clerg gang was coming into the Longhorn, and so now he swung toward the door, curious to have a look at the outfit which had shot up the town.

As he flipped open the batwings, one of varnished panels slapped a big, dark, rock-visaged man in the face.

The heavy-set fellow cursed savagely. He jerked to a stop. His packed group of followers halted with him.

"Gosh! Excuse me!" apologized the fancily-dressed cowboy. "I—"

"You cussed young fool!" shouted Black Gran Clerg. "Whyn't you watch what you're doin'?" He seized the cowboy's yellow neckscarf and shirt collar in a hairy hand, shoved him backward into the Longhorn, and whirled him against the front wall.

Black's three brothers and the eight gun-sliding punchers of the Rafter Arrow C crowded in after him, eager to see a fight.

Holding his victim pinned against the wall, Black Gran drew back a knotty club of a fist.

"Feller, I've a danged good notion to knock yore head right through the 'dobe!" he roared.

"I told you I'm sorry. Besides, it was as much your fault as mine. I didn't know anybody was coming in, and—"

"Shut up, or I'll—" The big fist went back a little farther.

"Shucks, Gran, don't let it go!" Beanpole Clerg, second of the four brothers drawled disgustedly. "Cain't you see he's only a dude cowboy?"

Curiosity replaced the rage that had mottled Black Gran's heavy countenance. He released his hold and stepped back; studied the young fellow from head to foot and then up again. Suddenly he burst into a guffaw. "Who the Sam Hill air you, Sporty, an' where you from?"

The other straightened the gaudy neck-

scarf, and the expensive gray Stetson with impatient little jerks and strokes. In a voice that was unexcited, but just a little hard he said: "My name's Dave Kridelbaugh, and I'm from—what difference does it make where I'm from?"

Flint Clerg, a chunky man with a raw-red face and pinkish eyes, sneered through broken teeth: "So-o-ome cowboy! Fer what drugstore did you last ride, buckaroo?" Again there was raucous laughter. This time the whole Rafter Arrow C outfit joined in the insulting mirth.

DESPITE his dudish get-up, Dave Kridelbaugh's face was lean and tanned, and the blue eyes in it were hard. He muttered something under his breath. No one seemed to hear just what it was. Then he started to move away.

Dogie Clerg, a sneering youth with a drooping mouth that seeped tobacco juice at the corners, shoved him back and said: "Wait a minute, sissie. Give us another look at them fancy duds uh yore'n. Gosh, I never seen so many conchas, an' bright studs, an' doodads on any one outfit in all my life."

"Don't make me mad," sighed Dave. But again no one seemed to hear.

"An' notice the two purty six-guns," observed the horse-faced, sorrel-haired Beanpole Clerg. "I reckon he had to git new weepuns because his old uns was so notched his hands was becomin' warty from handlin' 'em."

Dave took a deep breath. Smooth ridges of muscle flowed beneath his fancy, form-fitting shirt. Hard little cords worked on his lean jaws. "Don't make me mad!" he spat out.

For just a moment there was surprised stillness, while everyone looked at the flashy cowboy, wondering if his character had been misread. And then Dogie Clerk broke the silence with a frog-like chuckle.

"Heck, no, Gran; fer heben's sake don't make the hellyun mad! He might jerk off yore left hind laig an' whup you with the bloody end of it!"

"Yeah," put in Flint, "he might even slap you on the wrist. You cain't never tell about sech hambres."

"Er hit you in the nose with his powder puff," warned Beanpole.

"I'm trying to hold my temper," Dave said huskily.

"I been wonderin' what become of my

toothbresh," chortled Black Gran; "but now I know. Here she is, right here." He reached out, caught hold of Dave's waxed mustache, and jerked it brutally.

The young fellow's teeth snapped. His eyes flashed blue fire. He lashed out with a brown fist. Black Gran jerked back his head just in time. The blow missed his square chin by a thin fraction of an inch.

As the swing ended, Dave went into a crouch, sinewy hands spread and tensed above the ivory butts of his two obviously new six-guns. "You big walloper!" he ground out. "Dig for yore gun."

He relaxed; licked his lips.

Black Gran, too, had dropped into a gun crouch.

"Do what?" Black asked flatly.

"I ain't lookin' for no trouble," mumbled Dave. Turning, he began shouldering his way through the crowd. They jostled him and jeered as he made his way along.

Just as he was pushing through the batwing doors, droopy-mouthed Dogie Clerg swung a boot toe at his seat, but missed. As the young cowboy stumbled out onto the board sidewalk he wailed:

"Ple-e-ase, don't make me mad!"

"Oh, fer the luvva gawd, no!" mocked Black Gran Clerg. "Don't git the fire-eatin' hellion riled!"

Roaring and rocking with laughter, he led his crowd to the bar. Drinks were ordered, and soon all thoughts of the "dude" cowboy were displaced by what were considered to be more important ones.

Thirty minutes later Dave was playing a casual game of poker in the 'Dobe Dollar, when the four Clergs fanned in. They paused, spread-legged, near the double doors, and searched the room with their close-set eyes. Instantly there was a silence, for everyone sensed that trouble was imminent.

LED by Black Gran Clerg, the four brothers strode down the room. Their gazes were fixed now upon a lanky, droopy-mustached, grizzled man who sat at a card table in the back part of the room. His thin old face went hard as he saw them coming.

Black Gran stopped beside the table and looked down. There was a sneering smile on his dark, rugged face. "I hear you're runnin' for sheriff, Nate!" he drawled, as softly as his naturally harsh voice would allow.

The old man sent a jet of amber determinedly at a spittoon; then said: "You dad gummed right!"

Black Gran's hard smile vanished. His mouth twisted in an expression that was ugly to see. His brows were knitted over his rattlesnake eyes. Bending suddenly, he seized a handful of the old man's loose shirt front and yanked him upright. "Listen, Nate Larriby! You're gittin' out of Coyote Pass pronto—right now. Savvy? If you don't—" He shoved the muzzle of a forty-five against the grizzled man's thin nose. In fact, the end of the nose was lost in the gun's orifice.

Dave Kridelbaugh, watching, spoke softly: "Why, the doggoned bulldozer! He ought to have his head blowed off!"

"Sh-h-h, fool!" whispered the stud dealer. "Do you know who you're talking against? Them's the four Clerg brothers!"

For a moment old Nate Larriby glared back at Black Gran Clerg, and then all the fire and defiance died from the brown eyes. The tall form sagged. The bony chin dropped. "All right, Gran," he mumbled, "I'll git." His runover boots went clumping down the room and carried him out through the butterfly doors.

"Pore old fella!" thought Dave.

Again the rattle of cards, the dry rattling of a roulette wheel, the clacking of chips, a scruffing of feet, and voices.

They were strangely subdued now, those voices. No one spoke a word to the Clergs. Black Gran, Beanpole, and Flint went to the bar. The youngest Clerg—Dogie—came to the stud table where Dave was playing.

"Well, well! If it ain't Mr. Fancy Doodad!" he sneered as he recognized the flashily dressed stranger.

Dave paid studied attention to his cards. Dogie sat down. He lost steadily. As his money dwindled he became mean. Suddenly he turned to Dave and snarled through squirrel teeth. "You had no right to draw to them fives, seein' Jacks in sight."

"I had a king and an ace up, and I was hoping to match one of 'em for another pair, which I did."

"Git outa this game! You're a jinx to me!"

"But, gosh, I got a right to play. I—"

"I said git out."

Dogie's brow, with strands of stringy hair upon it, was low. His eyes were pale streaks. The corners of his tobacco-stained mouth were drooped.

Dave did not make any sort of a move. With a lurid oath, Dogie lurched to his feet. He kicked a side of Dave's chair and the fancily clad puncher went sprawling upon the floor.

He was up in an instant.

"You young sidewinder! I've stood enough! Make a play for your hardware! I'm giving you the start, then I'm going to—" His speech broke off. His tension relaxed. The ice in his eyes melted.

"You'll do what?" sneered Dogie Clerg, mimicking the words which his elder brother had spoken in the Longhorn.

Reluctantly Dave opened his lips to speak, but at that instant Black Gran came striding heavily onto the scene. "Hold it! Dogie, you young ijit! Do you want to git yoreself shot to doll-rags! Know who you're stackin' yoreself up agin?"

Dogie blinked stupidly at his brother, at Dave, then back at Black Gran. The elder Clerg winked ever so slightly. "Why, doggonit, Dogie, this here is that noted gun-flash from Arizony, the Gila Kid! He could make a pepper-shake outa you before you could even clear leather!"

To hide a grin, Dogie rolled a quid of tobacco and took a pot-shot at the nearest garboon. Seizing the cue handed him by Black Gran—a new joke, he thought—he said with apparent abjectness: "I'm sorry I got hos-tile, Gila Kid, an' I'm apologizin'. Reckon you'll forgive me, huh?"

"Why, I— I—"

"Aw, that's all right, Gila!" Black Gran slapped Dave on the back. "We know you're modest-like. Jest go ahead with yore poker game. I'll take keer uh Dogie. Thanks fer not killin' him."

DAVE righted his chair and sat down, but he was ill at ease. An excited murmuring was running about the room. Respectful, half-awed glances were coming in his direction. He didn't like it. He cashed in his chips and slipped out.

Meanwhile, Black Gran Clerg and his three brothers had assembled in a somewhat isolated booth. "What's the joke this time?" queried Dogie. "I thought I understood it at first, but you let 'im go without a guying."

"Yeah," put in the pink-haired, pink-eyed, lobster-faced Flint, "how come, Gran?"

"Wait a minute," the horse-featured

Beanpole objected, raising a long, bony hand. "Bud's got an idee."

"An idee!" exulted Black Gran, his oil-spot eyes gleaming. "I'll say I have! Listen! How about makin' the dude cowboy sheriff?"

"Wha-a-at!" from three astonished listeners.

"Shore! Why not? He's a weak sister. That's what we want, ain't it? We had another weak one which we was hazin' towards the office, but last night a vigilance committee persuaded 'im to leave town.

"Well, we'll now put up this dude feller and we'll guard him so close that said vigilance committee won't have a chance to throw a scare into him.

"With the dude in office we could go ahead with our rustle— Well, we could do jest about as we pleased, without fear of interference from the law. Git it?"

The other three Clergs low-voiced their enthusiasm. Black Gran directed: "Then leave it to me! I'll go out an' find that dude. Wait here!"

He found Dave, back in the Longhorn. The sporty cowboy tried to evade him, but Black Gran caught him slipping out through a side doorway and called him back. The elder Clerg requested the use of the proprietor's private office, and got it.

"Now look here, Dave," he began, "I's you an' me be friends. My bunch was sorter likkered up when we busted into town. You know, you could tell by the way we was ridin' wild. I'm mighty sorry for the way we treated you, an' I'm apologizin'." He shrugged heavy shoulders. "What more can a feller do?"

"You told in the 'Dobe Dollar that I'm the Gila Kid," Dave reminded steadily.

Black Gran shrugged again, spread big hands, smiled. "Jest to save yore face, after all we'd done to you. That's provin' we're sorry, ain't it? Say, Dave, you got a job?"

He leaned over the table, black eyes squinted. Dave fingered a spiked mustache and shook his head. "Nope."

"Then how'd you like to be our new sheriff?"

"What?"

"Yeah, I mean it! This county needs a patient feller like you. Besides, I want to prove how sorry the Clergs are for the way we treated you."

Dave was cold, both toward Black Gran and his proposition, but the elder Clerg had a lot of oil which he could empty upon

angry waters when it was to his advantage to do so.

"All right," Dave finally consented. "I need a job, and I'll take this one if I can get it, but remember, if I'm made sheriff I'll handle this town, and how!"

"Shore," said Black Gran, patting him indulgently upon the back. And forthwith he hurried to the 'Dobe Dollar to break the news to his three brothers.

THE next morning Coyote Pass was humming with the news that the Gila Kid was in town. That magnanimously he had kept a grip on his temper and passed off insults on the part of the Clergs, when he might well have killed the four of them in a gun fight. That the Clergs, having learned his true identity, were so appreciative of his sportsmanship that they were backing him for sheriff.

Since there were no requirements for prior residence in that semi-lawless region, the office was open to anyone who had the courage to run for it.

When Dave stepped out into the current of news and excitement the next morning, he was surprised. Forthwith he sought out the Clergs and requested an explanation of the stories they had circulated concerning him.

"Listen, young feller," advised Black Gran, "this here is polytics. In polytics a candylate needs a slogan, er a big idee, er sump'n'.

"Now we're runnin' you fer office as the Gila Kid, a lightnin'-fast gunner, but a man who holds his temper an' his gunfire until a fight is forced onto him. That's the kinda man this here county wants fer sheriff. Git the idee?"

"Yes, but—"

"I know what you aim to say, but you don't need to worry none about the real Gila Kid. If he ever shows up in these here parts, I'll git him to keep quiet. It's safe enough, at least until you git into office, an' then what could people do anyway?"

"If it's ever found out you ain't really the kid, us Clergs will simply say we played one of our little jokes on the town, an'—well, folks hereabouts has a sense of hoomer."

"Listen, Black Gran Clerg." Dave's blue eyes were determined as they looked steadily down the finger he pointed at the ranchman's broad, swarthy face. "Maybe you got me wrong.

"I don't know how come you Clergs want me fer sheriff, but I need a job mighty bad, and I'll take this one if I can get it. In fairness, though, I'm warning you again, that if I'm put into office you're going to see sheriffing such as this tough county maybe never had before. No favoritism to anybody, savvy?"

For a moment Black Gran's opaque eyes were a little dubious, a little worried as they looked into the hard, blue ones of the dude cowboy. But as Black Gran Clerg once more noted the spiked blonde mustache, the gaudy get-up, he said as if humoring a child:

"Shore, Dave, shore! Of course you're gonna be the big It, with a capital I. You'll sheriff this here county, an' how!"

Dave went to Chee Foo's shanty restaurant and had breakfast. Just as he left the place and started down the street he heard someone call cautiously. Glancing into an alley he saw a tall, lanky old man in shabby attire. It was Nate Larriby.

Dave went into the alley. "What you doin' still in town? Thought the Clergs scared you out last night."

"I couldn't git away so quick. I had things to pack; a little property to dispose of. I'm keepin' out of their sight, and leavin' town tonight. I ain't a coward," he added glumly. "I was a hard-shootin' ranger once, but now—well, I'm jest too old to buck them Clergs. Besides, I got a wife to live for.

"The late sheriff was a hard-shootin' hombre, too, but three days ago he was found dry-gulched. The Clergs done it, to keep him from bein' re-elected—but try to prove it!"

"I ain't fooled none by the stories goin' the rounds concernin' yore gunnin' ability. I ain't never seen the Gila Kid, but I know he ain't no dude. Fu'thermore, although few people knowed I was there, happens I was present in the Longhorn when the Clergs made a monkey outa you. Who are you, really, young fella?"

Dave grinned. "Name's Dave Kridelbaugh. I've been working in the movies until lately. Got laid off."

"A Hollywood cowboy! Never rode range in yore life! Thought you'd come out an' see what real cowboys looked like, huh? Now I know what them Clergs are up to. They want a weak man in office so they can carry on with their cussedness without interference from the law. They're rustlers,

robbers, killers; though nobody has been able to prove anything agin 'em.

"My pullin' out leaves you the only candidate for sheriff. Why don't you step aside git out of the country with me? The vigilance committee would then take holt an' sorter run things until a really capable officer could be put in charge. Right now the committee men are satisfied to have you, 'cause they think you're the Gila Kid."

"I need a job," Dave said a bit absently. "I hit this town practically broke. Besides, I—"

"Hey, Gila! Gila Kid! Where are you?" sounded the heavy voice of Black Gran Clerg. There was a tramping of feet on boardwalk near the mouth of the alley.

Old Nate Larriby muttered something and hurriedly disappeared behind a vacant building. Dave wheeled toward the plank sidewalk and came abruptly face to face with the four Clerg brothers.

"Where you been?" queried Black Gran, and then without waiting for an answer: "Come on, the poll will be openin' soon. Le's git to sowin' our propy-gander. Heard you'd come up this way, so—"

"Yeah, let's get busy," Dave cut in.

The poll opened at nine and closed at four. There really wasn't any use of counting votes for the office of sheriff, since there had been but one candidate.

The Rafter Arrow C outfit started whooping it up about dusk. Dave went to Black Gran Clerg and said with a sternness that surprised that outlaw ranchman: "Listen, hombre; remember, I told you that if I was elected I was going to be a real sheriff? No hog-wild stuff; savvy?"

For a moment Black Gran glowered in surprise, and then he laughed and wagged his big head in a knowing way. "All right, Gila Kid; whatever you say."

He jerked off Dave's thirty-dollar, feather-edge Stetson, ruffed the dudish cowboy's hair, clapped the hat back onto its owner's head, and strode laughing away.

IT WAS about eight o'clock when the first shooting broke out. Dave bolted to the Longhorn and found a lanky form slumped over a table in a half-darkened booth. It was poor old Nate Larriby!

His forehead rested upon folded arms as if he had dropped into a drunken sleep, but a slowly growing pool of crimson was creeping from beneath his checkered right sleeve. Near the booth stood Dogie Clerg, a drawn six-gun in his right hand.

Dave strode to the humped form, seized the frayed collar, and jerked old Nate's head up. The eyes rolled open. "I—I slipped back for a last drink. He happened to find me." The chin fell. Dave released his hold. The body slumped upon the table again. Nate Larriby was dead.

Dave turned. His eyes were as hard as chips of blue glass.

Dogie Clerg grinned in a sickly way, shoved his gun into its holster, and rolled his quid of tobacco. "Self-defense," he claimed with a leer. "I guess he musta been drinkin'. I was walkin' towards the booth when he pulled on me. I had to shoot—er—be shot."

"Liar!" shouted a leathery-faced old ranchman who stood at the bar. "I seen the whole thing! Dogie Clerg murdered pore ol' Nate in cold blood! Said nary a word, and didn't give him a chance to draw; jest shot him plumb heartless!"

Dogie wheeled, a snarl on his tobacco-stained lips. But a chilling voice froze him.

"Dogie Clerg, I'm arresting you for the murder of Nate Larriby!"

Dogie turned slowly. For a moment he stood gazing, apparently unable to believe eyes and ears; then his mouth puckered about his squirrel teeth.

"W'y, you stinkin' dude! I'll—"

"Unbuckle your gunbelt and let it drop!" Dave's voice popped like a stockwhip. He was standing wide-legged, arms folded, but there was something deadly in his blue eyes.

Apparently Dogie failed to notice it. "Yellow bellied double-crosser!"

He drove for his gun—then hell tore loose.

DAVE'S draw was absolutely invisible to the several pairs of wide eyes that were watching, there in the Longhorn. Two shots crashed out.

A tuft of splinters sprouted up around a hole six feet in front of Dogie's boot toes. A crimson, blue-rimmed dot magically appeared between two strands of straight black hair on his narrow forehead. He dropped his Colt. His legs buckled and he went down as gently as if he had been suddenly overcome by sleeping sickness.

Excitement broke out. Dave paid no noticeable attention to it. He blew smoke from one of his ivory-handled guns; then ejected a shell and inserted a fresh cartridge. There was something awful in the calm way he did it.

He holstered the weapon and walked to

the bar. "Whisky, and make it a tall one."

He took his good time about disposing of the drink. Just as he drained the glass and turned, a wide-eyed cowboy burst into the Longhorn. "You better scoot, Sheriff. The other three Clergs are comin' with blood in their eyes!"

Dave did not scoot. His mouth twisted in a hard smile.

"It's their funeral." He spoke softly.

Turning, he walked to the lower end of the bar and sat down on a beer keg.

"Don't anybody get between me and the door," he murmured.

He was steadily forming a cigarette when the batwings flapped open.

The three remaining Clergs lurched into the room and stopped, spread-legged, hands on six-guns. For a moment their eyes were glued upon the grotesquely sprawled form of their youngest brother. And then Black Gran said in a voice that rasped like a saw dragged across a bar of rusty steel:

"Whaire is he?"

Dave stood up from his half-hidden position behind the lower end of the bar.

"Meaning me?" he questioned calmly; as he popped a match and lighted his cigarette. And then he went on in a voice that droned monotonously:

"Dogie murdered old Nate Larriby in cold blood. When I told him he was under arrest, he made the mistake of pulling on me. It was me or him; so—" He gestured slightly, but eloquently.

For a moment there was deathly stillness there in the Longhorn; while the close-set eyes of the three remaining Clergs stared at the calm young man in the dude range attire. Then Black Gran Clerg said jerkily:

"I see we've made a mistake, feller. You must be plenty good to outdraw Dogie—but now we're goin' to kill you!"

The next instant guns were bucking, roaring, hurling missiles of death.

Disdaining the shelter of the lower end of the bar, Dave sprang toward the center of the room. His movements were like those of a leaping catamount. His two ivory-handled guns were out and singing a duet of death.

Black Gran spun half around, a surprised look on his heavy, swarthy face; his gun gripped in his right hand. His bullet had smashed a hole through a rear wall.

Beanpole uttered an awful half-sobbing, half-laughing sound and screwed down to the floor on his long legs. Crimson was dripping from his right eyebrow. His face

bumped sickeningly against the floor.

Flint Clerg cursed like a madman and fanned the hammer of his Colt.

No one was ever able to describe accurately the battle that took place there in the Longhorn. It all happened too quickly for human eyes to follow. When it was over, Flint Clerg lay on his back, coughing pink froth. Beanpole's long form was twisted in a grotesque heap. Black Gran finally had flopped, legs and arms flung wide; five bullet holes in his big body.

Dazedly, the flashily dressed cowboy reloaded his two fancy six-guns; then thrust them into their ornately studded holsters. He stumbled to the bar. "Whisky straight, and make her tall."

As he stood there, one elbow resting on the counter, he twisted a spike of his blond mustache. Red polkadots had appeared on the front of his gray shirt.

"Who are you, young feller?" queried the leathery-faced old ranchman.

The dull blue eyes turned upon him. The flashy cowboy grinned twistedly while pulling at a cigarette. "Real name's Dave Kridelbaugh; known as the Gila Kid."

"But the sporty git-up?"

"Don't judge a critter by its spots. I'm—well, what Hollywood calls 'made up,' jest now. A year ago I went there and got a job, playing villain parts in Westerns. Now Westerns are on the slump; so I was laid off.

"Happens just as I got out of a job I received a letter from Black Gran Clerg, which same had been forwarded from all over hell's half acres. He'd heard of me and wanted me to come here and work for him. I didn't know nothing about the Clergs, but the minute I set eyes on 'em I knew I didn't want to work for them."

He leaned more heavily against the bar. The red polkadots on his shirt front were blurring into splotches. His chin drooped to his breast. His cigarette hung limply.

"I told 'em—not to—get me riled," he sighed. "When I get sore—I go plumb gun-mad! I—I'm sorry, but that's just the way I am!"

TWENTY minutes later a rotund little doctor said: "Tough as rawhide. He'll pull out. You can't kill men like him."

Dave's eyelids opened and he grinned at the little doctor. "Of course I'll live, and what I mean, this here county is going to see some sheriffing such as it has never seen before. And you can tell that to the rest of the toughs."

Flailing fists were met with good guarding, but slammed home nevertheless.



HERITAGE OF THE DAMNED

by BRIAN LOOMIS

When Ben Caswell, the kid foreman of the Bar G Circle, rode out to face that cattle-killing owlhooter Gus Grell, the hands of that spread knew the kid would need more than six-gun counsel for a chance to survive that hot-lead showdown!

TROUBLE, brewing on the Bar G Circle since the moment Joe Graham departed to visit a friend who was desperately ill in Chicago, broke out with suddenness and decision on the fourth morning of Ben Caswell's rule.

Joe was his own foreman, superintendent, and all the officers of his cattle company owning the spread, but it had been rumored about the bunkhouse for some time that he meant to appoint a range foreman to shoulder some of the growing responsibility.

Most of the cow-waddies figured Gus Grell for the job inasmuch as Grell had been longest in the Bar G Circle employ and knew stock as he knew the back of his

hand. Only quick-moving, slow-talking Ike Preston, veteran of thirty years' range work from Calgary to Mexico, calculated that Grell wouldn't be chosen—and Ike was right.

When the boss announced his departure for Chicago he added simply that young Ben Caswell would be acting foreman, and so "yuh boys just hark to Ben for a spell till I get back."

It was a bitter draught for Gus Grell, for one of his first authoritative acts would have been to fire Ben. "Pickin' out a guy that's under suspicion for the Littleton Bank job!" he growled sourly.

"He ain't under suspicion, Gus," reminded Tex Fernvale, desirous of being fair.

"Sheriff Munn didn't have nothin' on Ben except that he was seen near the bank right after the job. Didn't find any loot, and couldn't make him come out with a confession. Besides, Joe Graham convinced the sheriff Caswell wasn't that kind."

The other grunted, kicked at a tuft of bunchgrass, and strode away. Caswell and Grell didn't get along, had never hit it off since the twenty-two-year-old puncher joined the Bar G Circle a year ago. Ben was kiddish looking, with freckles spraying a good-natured face that never became very dark even under the prairie sun. He had a turned-up nose, a wide grin, and he was invariably cheerful.

Gus Grell was moody, of medium height, possessing a pair of shoulders that could push over a Brahma. He was irritable and jealous—the bully type exactly. As soon as Joe Graham was gone, Gus began to make trouble. His sullenness doubled; he became mean and covertly rebellious. His eyes mirrored the man's hate so that Ben scarcely needed Ike Preston's warning. "Look out for that hombre, youngster. He's shore riled 'cause yuh got the job. Reckon he'll try to ruin yuh with the old man."

Caswell shrugged his shoulders. Narrowly, but with casual air, he did look out for Grell, and for cowardly Snipe Daly, who fawned on his master like a yellow cur.

IN THE fourth morning of his new authority the young acting foreman returned to the ranch buildings from an early errand to a nearby spread. Sighting the cloud of acrid dust that billowed and eddied from the cattle pens, he knew the boys were branding again. Ben slowed his horse, swung to earth, and tied reins around the juniper bars. He climbed to the topmost rail and sat a moment watching.

The Bar G Circle had calves enough this year, what with Joe Graham's purchase of Chain T stock, to keep the comparatively small force of waddies busy two long days. Below him, emerging like wraiths from the stinging dust, two ropers worked busily. Half a dozen irons lay in the fire. Four were in use as Ben watched.

Suddenly his lips pursed—which was a bad sign with Ben. He scrambled inside the stock pen and went directly to the spot where Gus Grell stood. Caswell said nothing as he knelt beside a motionless Hereford calf and briefly examined it. But when he rose to full height again his blue eyes snapped with anger.

"Grell, I warned yuh not to get too strong with these calves! Killed one yesterday by throwin' its backbone out, an' yuh've done the same thing again. Shucks," he exclaimed ruefully, staring at the lifeless animal at his feet. "Joe ain't goin' to like havin' his beef killed before it's growed."

The bully of the Bar G Circle cast a malevolent glance at his young boss. He too straightened, hands on his beefy hips. "Accident, that's all," he grunted shortly. "Bound to happen sometimes."

They exchanged looks. "It's no accident when yuh grab his neck with one hand, get yore other arm around his middle, an' bend a calf into a V. Nobody else here kills stock durin' brandin', Grell."

Gus stiffened and his hard eyes narrowed. "Yuh mean I did it a-purpose?" he challenged.

Ben held the man's gaze, then motioned to Ike Preston. "Take this to Sing Lah, will yuh, Ike? Reckon Sing can make use o' the carcass."

"I asked if yuh mean I killed that critter a-purpose?"

Ben kept his stance as the older man's bulk came closer in threatening accusation. Cool and determined, he spat out the last of his plug, fumbled in a rear pocket of his overall pants, and produced fresh tobacco. When part of this was in motion in one cheek he nodded slowly. "Reckon yuh savvy about right, Grell."

The four or five men nearby suspended work. Obviously it was to be a showdown—and a risky one for the acting foreman. Gus Grell was thirty pounds heavier; he was surprisingly fast on his feet and clever with his blows. An unprincipled fighter, he would seize any opening and make the most of it. Nobody had seen Ben Caswell in a scrap, but the chances were against his being the bully's equal.

A low rumble emanating from Grell's deep chest burst from his puffy lips like the roar of an angry bull. "Ain't no crooked bank buster gonna call me names an' get away with 'em! Time somebody took yuh down a peg, anyhow," he snorted with mounting wrath, "an' I got a good mind to do it!"

Blood surged faster through Ben's veins at the unfounded epithet, and he felt sudden longing to smash the fellow's brutal, ape-like face. For an instant he considered firing Grell on the spot; but he discarded that notion, for while Gus and Snipe Daly were leading trouble makers, there were

others to be shown who was boss. And, short-handed already, the Bar G Circle could ill afford to lose a single waddy.

"I suggest," Ben stated in an icy tone, "that yuh get back to work. An' don't handle them calves so rough after this, savvy?"

He turned on his heel. "Look out!" yelled Ike Preston.

Ben whipped around. A crashing maul-like fist threatened to rip an ear from his head. Slightly dazed, the youth crouched and sidestepped. A thick form hurtled past, and Caswell's outflung boot took Gus Grell in the shin. He plunged face first into the dust of the cattle pen, and only stopped sliding six inches from the fire.

But instead of settling the matter, this made things worse. Gus scrambled to his feet spitting dust and curses. He made one dive for his holstered .45, but paused.

"Hands off that shooter!"

GROWLING awful threats, the man tensed as young Caswell approached, his own six-gun covering his rival, eyes watching with hawk-like exactitude. He gripped Grell's weapon by the butt, lifted and tossed it to Ike Preston. "Take mine, too. Reckon we can settle this some other way."

The bully caught Snipe Daly's look and felt that when gunplay was needed, Snipe would supply it. Gus gloated inwardly as his cruel gaze traveled over Ben's hundred-and-seventy-pound frame, lithe and powerful, but not powerful enough. Then, hoping to catch this squirt of a foreman napping, Grell charged.

The struggle was swift and brief. Fists smacked on flesh; two bodies surged back and forth; grunts, ejaculations, and quick-sucked gasps reached the tense watchers on the pen bars. When the dust cleared somewhat young Ben Caswell lay prone, staring skyward. Grell, with contemptuous imprecations, awaited his rise.

Ike Preston's worried survey found his companions divided as to sympathy. Fernvale had always been friendly to Ben; there was no jealousy in his nature. But Snipe Daly was Grell's shadow, had Grell's jealousy of Ben's new power. Husing and Jones were doubtful—leaned toward whoever should win this fight.

As Preston was about to spring down from his perch to aid Ben, the youth crawled painfully to his feet. The lower half of

his face was bloody from his spurting nose. He had a dark bruise under one eye and all told, looked much the worse for wear. But the kid was game; he sprang suddenly erect and sent a well-aimed blow at Grell's jaw. Crack! Gus' head tilted sharply as knuckles sounded on bone. The powerful ranny tottered on his heels and staggered backward.

But Caswell hadn't the force to put Gus out. With a ferocity that was astounding, with his beet-red countenance contorted in jealousy and hate, Gus charged.

Failing fists were met with good guarding, but slammed home nevertheless. Finally, with a left-hand feint and a short, bone-crushing right uppercut, Grell triumphed. Ben Caswell's knees gave way. His usually cheerful face went pale and absolutely blank. Air burst from his lungs and he sprawled like an upset turtle, threshed feebly—then lay still.

"Stop, or I'll drill yuh!"

Ike Preston had seen a good many men like Gus Grell, and he knew that once fully aroused their small minds worked to murder pitch at sight of a man down. His knife-like challenge made Grell pause. One spurred boot was lifted to crush in the face of the prostrate man. Animal ferocity flamed in that brute countenance—lust, in which reason was drowned like a kitten in a watering trough.

Snipe Daly found himself between Ike and Grell; he had no chance to draw even had he possessed the courage to face a hip-shooter like Preston. Gus Grell hesitated, then snarling curses at empty air, slowly replaced his foot on the ground. "Git back!" was the veteran puncher's next command.

By now the other men had recovered their wits. Swarming down from the fence, they surrounded Gus while Ike went to Ben Caswell, holstered his gun, and wrapped long, muscular arms around the kid. He had lifted Ben from the ground when the acting foreman came to.

"I—I'm all—right," he muttered thickly. Ike put him down, mopped blood from his mouth and chin with a fresh bandana, and worked the youth's arms and legs to freshen circulation. In another minute Ben staggered to his feet, groggy but in command of his faculties. He had taken a terrific beating, but the bitterness of his thoughts was double the pain of his body.

A glance around the staring circle of faces told Caswell that defeat had been



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ADDRESS 8

COWBOY SHORT STORIES

costly. Among these men who could whip all comers he was the man in command. It was the law of the wolf pack transferred to the range, and lacking the physique to maul Gus Grell, the youth's troubles were going to be vastly increased from this instant.

It was on the tip of his tongue to lodge protest, but fortunately he checked himself. Whining would not aid him; what these rannihans wanted was a boss in blows as well as in name. They watched now as if half expecting Ben to yield the acting foremanship to his conqueror—a thing he could not, would not do, if he were flayed alive!

THE youth's jaw set and his single good eye took on unmistakable determination. In the taut silence he recognized his need for masterful handling, but seemed able to think of no way to control the situation. Again he considered firing Grell—which meant Snipe Daly, too—but again discarded the notion. It wouldn't raise his status with Fernvale, Husing, or Jones. But if Ben Caswell wanted to continue as acting foreman he needed to exert authority right now in decisive terms.

Ben brushed himself off, rescued his sombrero, and jammed it on his sandy head. "All right, boys—back to work. Grell, yuh better ride out to North Valley an' tell Hank Green I want him. Stay with the herd in Hank's place."

The men exchanged looks of amazement. The bully's jaw dropped; a sneer flashed over his beefy countenance and he parted swollen lips to speak. But something stayed Grell, some inner voice. He merely issued a contemptuous grunt, spun on his heel, and headed for the juniper bars. A moment later his calico pony scudded away, the men returned to branding calves, while Caswell went to the bunkhouse to wash and attend his hurts.

After a few minutes' work in total silence, gossip arose as to whether young Ben was fit to hold the responsibility Joe Graham had conferred on him.

"Shucks!" exclaimed Snipe Daly as he poked an iron into the fire. "A guy that can't hold his job with his fists ain't got no business orderin' me around!"

Runt Jones shot tobacco juice into the embers and glanced at Daly. "For once you're almost headed for bein' correct."

"Yeah," chimed in Fernvale, a man of

HERITAGE OF THE DAMNED

twenty-eight, "the kid's all right in his way. But he's shore gonna get rode hard from now on. Gus is gonna make plenty trouble—more'n he ever has—or I'm a shoe-string's grampa."

When he had bathed and closed his cuts with adhesive tape, Caswell went to the cook shanty to give Sing Lah orders regarding the second dead calf within two days. About to turn away, he felt the yellow man's hand on his arm.

"Me catchem fight—plenty bad!" Sing Lah informed him earnestly, and not at all in derision. He stared at Ben's blackened eye, frowned, and shook his head. "Him Grell one tough son-of-a-biscuit, you bet! Plenty bad fighter, no? Kickem, punchem belly, no?"

Ben summoned a rueful grin and nodded. "Between you and me, Sing, he shore don't follow the Marquis of Whosis rules. Reckon he'd just as soon knife a guy that was down.

"But I'm stickin' to my job," he vowed, and smashed one fist into his other palm for emphasis. "Joe Graham helped me out've the bank hold-up mess because there wasn't any proof, and he believed in me. I'm goin' to run this spread accordin' to Joe's orders an' prove myself to him. No Gus Grell's rulin' this roost, Sing—and don't you forget that, either!"

The Chinaman grinned toothlessly. "You fightem Grell like he fightem you. Catchem plenty hurt you listen Chink way!"

The upshot was that Caswell listened and felt his interest mounting as Sing Lah explained. The next half hour passed quickly, so that by the time Ben rode to North Valley Gus Grell had told his story with suitable variation and managed to stir up dissension among the riders there.

"Hell!" snapped Bart McDow. "He's only a kid, and if he can't enforce orders he ain't the guy to give 'em. Notice how Joe Graham runs this here cow farm? With his two big fists an' a damned quick six-gun!"

"Joe oughtn't to've made Ben actin' foreman," was Hank Green's view. "I ain't sayin' whether I think Caswell was guilty or not about them Littleton Bank bonds. But a guy under suspicion, 'specially when he ain't able to boss like he should, ain't got no right bein' foreman, just like Gus says."

One casual survey showed Ben Caswell how the men felt. He had lost invaluable

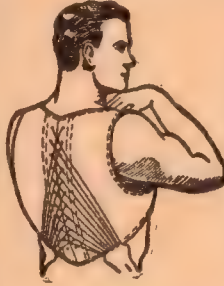
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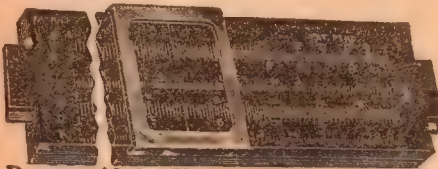
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(Continued from Page 101)

prestige when he had lost that fight. The law of might counted, and Grell's job of punishing was thorough and definite as the youth's closed eye, battered nose, and face attested. Ben was faced with smoldering rebellion. An order they didn't like and led by the two-hundred-pound bully, the nine Bar G Circle riders might actually strike—or all save Ike Preston.

SITTING at the head of the board table during supper that night Ben felt distinctly ill at ease. He could not keep the talk in ordinary, careless channels. Every so often quiet reigned, during which came covert, skeptical stares, and from Grell and Snipe Daly outright contemptuous glances.

A foreman who could not enforce his authority didn't deserve to have it—that was the meaning of every look, the gist of every conversation during the next two days. But Caswell went about his business, tactful and diplomatic with the bully, yet budging not one inch when it came to assigning Grell to work Joe Graham would have assigned him.

So discouraging did the situation become that only two things kept Ben from wiring his resignation to Graham and leaving for new fields. One was that he never acknowledged defeat without a long, hard fight. The other was allied with gratitude.

Ben's presence near the Littleton Bank the night Ase Monroe had been slugged while working over monthly statements, was due to pure chance. A pair of rascals the old man could not describe got away with three hundred dollars cash and seven thousand in bonds. Three citizens, including Sheriff Munn, had seen Caswell emerge from the shadow near the bank about the time the job was done, and he constituted the only suspect.

Investigation proved nothing, but some persons still looked askance at Ben. He owed a great deal to Joe Graham for defending him. "Say, that boy's straight as a ruler!" the cattleman vowed. Now, to prove his faith, he trusted Ben with the ranch.

Thinking of this, and of his natural ambition to make good as a range boss, the youth determined to stay. But things were growing worse, and it took but half an eye to see that Gus Grell was winning every hand to dissatisfaction and contempt. Work was done in a haphazard, slovenly manner. Once Caswell, riding to the North Valley herd, found in amazement that not

a single Bar G Circle man was there! He demanded of Sam Husing why he had not been on the job. The fellow lifted eyebrows in surprise. "Gus said on account o' them steep rock sides the cows couldn't get far anyhow, and didn't need watchin'. So I thought—"

"Grell told yuh?" snapped Caswell angrily. "What's that got to do with it? Look here, Husing: I'll stand no nonsense from the likes of you! Get on yore hoss an' get out there—and stay. Gus Grell's got nothing to say; I'm boss here as yuh know very well!"

The puncher climbed astride his mustang. "The hell I know it!" he muttered under his breath—and made off.

Ben stared at the waddy's departing back. The supreme daring of Grell, the man's confident influence among the hands, was amazing. Anger gripped Ben and he felt an impulse to seek out Gus and call him to account. But realization followed that it would lead to a fight. And the cold hard fact was that another defeat would ruin him entirely, take away any possible chance to keep on as Joe Graham's representative.

Nor could he fire Grell any more than before. Every man save possibly Preston would quit with Gus—and during the last two days Ben thought he had detected slight disappointment in the eyes of his only supporter, as if even Ike were losing faith.

JOE GRAHAM had been gone a week when one evening shortly after eight o'clock Grell stomped into the ranch house office where Ben was working over the six hundred dollars cash he had drawn from the bank for the payroll. "Say," the thick-set bully opened in a truculent tone, "that silver-mounted quirt I won at the Cheyenne rodeo's been stolen."

His words seemed to carry accusation and Ben looked up. He said nothing for an instant but his brain whirled with thoughts. "Sorry it's gone," he stated curtly. "But yuh'll have to look for it yoreself. I've got no time to go hunting quirts, as yuh know very well."

Grell assumed a leer. "We found it." "Yuh found it?" Ben's face mirrored surprise and irritation as he got out of his chair. "Then why come botherin' me about it bein' stole?"

"Cause," snapped the bully, and planted his feet wide apart while he eyed his man, "we found an empty envelope with the

(Continued on Page 104)

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(Continued from Page 103)
 quirt, marked 'Littleton State Bank,' and the whole business was in yore bunk!" Fernvale, Green, Jones, and Husing.

Ben Caswell began to frown puzzledly, then stiffened as if struck. He took a step toward his accuser. "Yuh lie, yuh good for nothin' trouble-maker! I had nothin' to do with yore quirt. And as to the bank bonds, I—" He stopped. Suddenly both men went for their guns.

"Draw an' yo're a dead man!"

Grell's weapon flashed into his hand while Ben's was still in its holster. With teeth clenched in rage, Caswell loosed his .45. He was about to speak when Grell called over his shoulder. "Come in, boys." And to the prisoner's utter astonishment, through the open door trooped Snipe Daly, Fernvale, Green, Jones, and Husing, all with faces grim and determined.

"Say!" breathed Ben. "What's the meaning o' this? Yuh get back to work, the lot of yuh, or I'll—"

"Yuh'll do nothin', Caswell," Runt Jones cut in sharply. "We've had enough o' yore managin' the spread and we're agreed that Joe Graham's going to find things in tiptop shape when he gets back. Which means, he ain't goin' to find yuh here at all!"

Ben's jaw sagged at this boldness—engineered, as was plainly evident, by Grell. Before he could speak Sam Husing turned to the ringleader. "Gus, somebody oughta ride for the sheriff. It's our duty to hand this guy over so's Munn can clear up the bank job. Besides, we don't want him around here any more."

Again the prisoner's countenance showed astonishment, quickly changing to greater wrath. "Get out of here, the lot of yuh!" he snapped. "Go on—vamoose!"

Their reply came in growls of derision. "We'll get out, all right," promised Snipe Daly, making sure that he was not in the line of fire between his chief and Caswell. "But first off we're gettin' rid of yuh, yuh lousy foreman! We oughta hand 'im over to Sheriff Munn."

"Shore thing," agreed Fernvale. "Jim can clear up the bank job in short order when he puts the screws on Caswell."

The prisoner's eyes narrowed. When he spoke it was in a placating tone that deceived his captors. "Boys, yuh know I wouldn't tackle any bank, that I'm not the robbin' kind. As far as the Bar G Circle goes, all I want is to see things run right. So what do yuh say—"

HERITAGE OF THE DAMNED

He interrupted himself to spring at Grell. One well-aimed blow sent the bully's six-gun hurtling against the wall. In a flash Ben's weapon came into his fist, its muzzle swaying around the circle of startled faces.

"Up with yore hands, everybody! Fernvale, drop yore gun on the floor. Get Husing's, and toss it here in front o' me. Now get Jones' an' Snipe's. Careful, or yuh'll never see breakfast!"

Imprecations and oaths snarled at him did not so much as move a muscle in the youth's set face. "Get back along the wall, all of yuh!" he ordered next, and made his way toward the desk and safe that stood in one corner. "Hands high, now, and don't so much as blink!"

Thoroughly convinced of his grim desperation, not a man offered resistance beyond threats of vengeance. Ben Caswell paid no heed; he scooped the six hundred dollars in cash from Joe Graham's desk. And while his gun continued slowly to wave in a commanding semi-circle, he stuffed the money into the square black safe without looking at it. "Careful!" he kept warning them. "Yuh know how tough bank robbers are!"

So intent was the acting foreman upon keeping mastery that he forgot Graham's instructions about locking the safe. An old-fashioned iron affair, its lock and hinges would offer little difficulty to an experienced cracksman. Above the dial a hand lever was fixed, making it possible to latch the door before spinning the dial for locking.

Ben, who had never examined a safe until Graham showed him this one, forgot one requisite. He shoved the door to with a heave of his foot. Then he stooped and grasped the lever. He heard a click as the latch snapped, and straightening, backed to the doorway of the ranch office.

"Yo're gettin' in a lot o' trouble, forcin' me off this spread with a cheap excuse like findin' that envelope and quit," he warned the men held at bay by his vigilant .45. "Better think twice, Husing—you, too, Jones and Green and Fernvale. When Joe—"

"We've thought o' that already," snapped big Sam Husing. "Joe Graham will be better off without a guy that can't run the spread!"

"Yeah, and yuh might get away now, Caswell, but Sheriff Munn will shore catch up with yuh!" Gus Grell's lowered brows showed that the man was watching cat-like for the slightest opening. But none

(Continued on Page 106)

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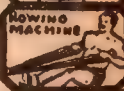
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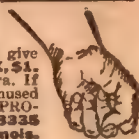
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COWBOY SHORT STORIES

(Continued from Page 105)

appeared; the youth kept his gun alert as he backed through the doorway with the bitter knowledge that he was beaten, that now it was a question of personal safety.

He had kicked their little heap of weapons outside. Suddenly Ben whirled, slammed the door, and snatched up a two-by-four lying handy. Before they could rush forward he had the board well propped. At once he took to his heels in the direction of the corral.

A saddled horse appeared before him, evidently belonging to someone just come in from the range. Ben Caswell snatched the reins, leaped astride, and was off.

HALF an hour later he paused in the deep gloom of cottonwoods beside Baines' Creek. No sound of pursuit reached him, and the youth dismounted to rest his horse. Lips pursed and face wearing a look of sober reflection, he reviewed the final events of his downfall as acting foreman.

He had failed so utterly and completely that the best thing now was to leave Littleton County and start anew somewhere else. His reputation was gone and he had lost all authority over Joe's men. Probably would lose the respect of Graham himself on his return from Chicago. And all this trouble because he hadn't whipped Gus Grell! He ground his teeth in self-accusation.

Of course the quilt and envelope affair had been a trick—a pretty bald one—on Grell's part. The man had swelled with self-confidence until his jealousy demanded complete removal of his rival. Anyone could procure a Littleton Bank envelope, Ben supposed. And as to the quilt—well, it was a simple matter for Grell to tuck that into his bedroll and then find it.

Caswell stiffened as a thought struck him. Scene by scene, he repictured the brief, pungent drama in the ranch-house office. Then uttering an exclamation, he drove one fist into his other palm.

"Gosh!" he breathed. "I—I didn't turn the dial. The safe ain't really locked!"

For some time he stood sucking a cigarette in the blackness of the cottonwood patch. At last he shook his head, heaved a brief sigh, and turned toward his horse. "Reckon I lost out completely so far as holdin' the job goes," he muttered, inserting a booted toe into a stirrup. "But I got to go back an' lock that safe, 'cause Gus Grell 'ud shore have me in a bad light if somebody stole that six hundred bucks of payroll!"

HERITAGE OF THE DAMNED

Slowly and with eyes roving the darkness ahead, he started for the Bar G Circle. All he need do was to spin the safe's dial, then light out again. It was risky, but well worth the trip, to keep faith with the cattleman by protecting his money.

Proceeding with caution, Ben neared the ranch buildings sometime after ten o'clock. The bunkhouse was a blot of darkness in the moonlight that seeped through ominous clouds. Caswell paused in speculation; then he swung from his mount. Slowly, warily, he strode forward, halting beside the corral to look and listen.

The Bar G Circle lay wholly quiet.

Walking softly, he headed for the ranch office which he knew would not be locked since he had the key in his overalls pants. About to grasp the door-knob, Ben stiffened with quick-sucked breath. A match had been struck within!

His fingers on the Colt tightened and his pulse began to race. Ever so softly he grasped the door-knob and opened. Then, with suddenness which stabbed even his alert brain, a coarse voice boomed out:

"Up with yore hands, Caswell—an' quick!"

For answer Ben clenched his trigger. In the resultant stab of orange flame he glimpsed two men, one bending to the open safe, the other at a crouch with two .45's leveled his way. Both guns exploded, but the slugs whizzed close over Ben's shoulder.

The man at the safe was Gus Grell. That briefly snatched glimpse seemed to do something to Ben. The desire sprang into his breast to maul the bully, to crash both fists into that jowled, jealous countenance—to smash the man!

A second shot from his own gun brought a scream of pain and fear from Snipe Daly. Without further ado the sneak whirled and made one dive for the window. Glass spattered, a body slammed to earth, and another scream of pain showed that Snipe was injured, that he would not rise at once.

AT THE first shot Gus Grell had leaped erect. Now his great shoulders loomed before Caswell and one ham-like fist snapped the youth's jaw upward. A gun gleamed as it raised to fire; but with a swift wave of his own weapon Ben knocked it skidding across the floor.

Shouts floated from the bunkhouse and men came tumbling out. Fernvale raced around the office corner in time to receive a hurtling body full in the stomach. A head

(Continued on Page 108)

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28x4.50-20	22	1.55	30x4.00-20	2.35	30x4.00-20	2.35	30x4.50-20	2.35
30x4.50-21	24	1.15	30x4.50-21	1.15	30x4.50-21	1.15	30x5.00-21	1.15
30x4.75-19	24	1.25	30x4.75-19	1.25	30x4.75-19	1.25	30x5.00-19	1.25
29x4.75-20	24	1.25	30x4.75-20	1.25	30x4.75-20	1.25	30x5.00-20	1.25
29x5.00-19	24	1.25	30x5.00-19	1.25	30x5.00-19	1.25	30x5.00-20	1.25
30x5.00-20	24	1.25	30x5.00-20	1.25	30x5.00-20	1.25	30x5.00-21	1.25
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30x6.00-19	1.35	30x6.00-19	1.35	30x6.00-19	1.35
30x6.00-20	1.35	30x6.00-20	1.35	30x6.00-20	1.35
30x6.00-21	1.35	30x6.00-21	1.35	30x6.00-21	1.35
30x6.00-22	1.35	30x6.00-22	1.35	30x6.00-22	1.35

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30x6.00-20	1.35	30x6.00-20	1.35	30x6.00-20	1.35
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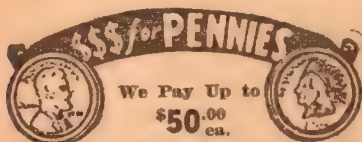
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COWBOY SHORT STORIES

(Continued from Page 107)

slammed into Runt Jones' chest. With gasped-out cries they staggered back, lost their guns, and went down.

Gus Grell was first on his feet. He looked once at the waddies with whom he had collided, then sighted his quarry. With a bull-like roar he charged full at Ben Caswell who stood clearly outlined in a pool of moonlight, gun tossed aside, a sardonic grimace on his face, waiting.

"I'll butcher yuh this time, yuh dirty puppy!" roared Grell. He sparred, shot a left at Ben's chin, and was astonished to have his wrist caught in a grip of iron. Instantly Caswell whirled to present his back, and hauled the 'bully close.

Came a bellow of pain and rage, and to the astonishment of everyone, Gus Grell's thick form described an arc over Caswell's shoulder and struck with a resounding thud.

Somebody leveled a .45, but Preston's own gun took command. "Let 'em fight!" he snapped. "Anybody that interferes gets a slug in his crawl!"

Grell had leaped up to spar again. But he slowly closed in, hurling swift lefts and rights which Caswell avoided as best he could.

"Come on!" panted the youth in molten anger. "I'm goin' to beat the devil out've yuh this time, yuh skunk! I'll knock—"

"Go on, Gus! Kill the little squirt! Tear 'im apart!" cried out Snipe Daly.

Grell looked around. He seemed to find general persuasion in the faces of the on-lookers, and gathered himself to charge again. He was more the tactician now, dancing this way and that, landing another tooth-rocking slam to Ben's out-thrust chin.

"Hang on, kid!" howled Ike Preston.

Encouraged by his success, Grell tried to follow it up. Again Ben retreated little by little, and as before, Gus could not land a knockout blow. He lost patience and bored in, flailing wildly with both box-like fists.

Too quick to let the other clinch, Ben Caswell dove in as Grell flashed past. Now he had his rival secure with both arms around the neck. Instantly he turned his back again, bent forward, and yanked. It was a duplicate of the former trick, and when the man's two hundred pounds had landed with force that made the earth tremble, the fight was over.

Grell lay motionless, breathing hard. For an instant there was taut silence as the punchers stared wide-eyed at the young acting foreman. "S-say!" chattered Snipe Daly. "Yuh—yuh killed him!"

HERITAGE OF THE DAMNED

Ben straightened. He had not escaped unharmed, but the damage done him was much less than in the cattle pen fight. He shook his head. "He'll come around."

"Boys," he gasped, and flung his hands apart in a gesture of utter honesty, "I came—back to lock the safe—on account of I'd forgot it when I had yuh—lined up in the office. Nabbed Daly an' Grell taking the payroll: that's what started this ruckus. Look!" he exclaimed as Snipe Daly darted quick glances for an avenue of escape. "That buzzard's still got some o' th' dough!"

Preston seized Daly. "He's plumb right, you hombres. I was ridin' in from the herd. Saw a light inside the office an' saw Caswell nab these two gents. Come on, be fair!" he urged Jones, Husing, Green, and Fernvale. "Yuh went with Grell because he beat up the kid. Wal, Ben shore won this match. How about fair play?"

Caswell stooped to pick up his gun and holstered it. He took two steps away, then paused. "Boys, I'll get off the Bar G if yuh want it that way. If yuh'll stand by Joe Graham's interests under Grell, I'll drop everything and mosey. But—"

"Hey, for gosh sakes!" Runt Jones stooped, snatched up a packet that lay almost at his feet, and straightened excitedly. "Gimme a match, quick! Wal, I'll be—"

"Littleton Bank!" broke in Ike Preston. He sent a boring look at Ben Caswell, who stepped closer to see. "Bonds, by the great soup-spoon o' Cleopatra!"

"Ike, yuh keep yore gun on Snipe an' Grell. 'Cause shore as there's a steer in Wyoming, Gus dropped these here bonds the fust time Ben throwed him!"

THERE followed a taut silence. Men stared at each other and frowned. As if by common consent, everyone nodded. "Wal," Fernvale said at last, and came forward with his hand outthrust to Ben Caswell, "I reckon yuh win, at that. We better hand this pair over to the law, as it might mean clearin' up the bank job."

"Me, I'm satisfied who's boss here," he concluded with a wry grin. "But say: whatever brand o' fightin' was that, Ben?"

Young Caswell grinned and shrugged his shoulders. "Sing Lah calls it ju jitsu. Wal, boys, I'm tuckered; I'm gonna hit the hay. Ike, yuh better hole up this pair in one o' the out-sheds. G'night, boys."

And to hide the exultation that flamed in his bruised face, the acting foreman of the Bar G Circle strode away, satisfied.

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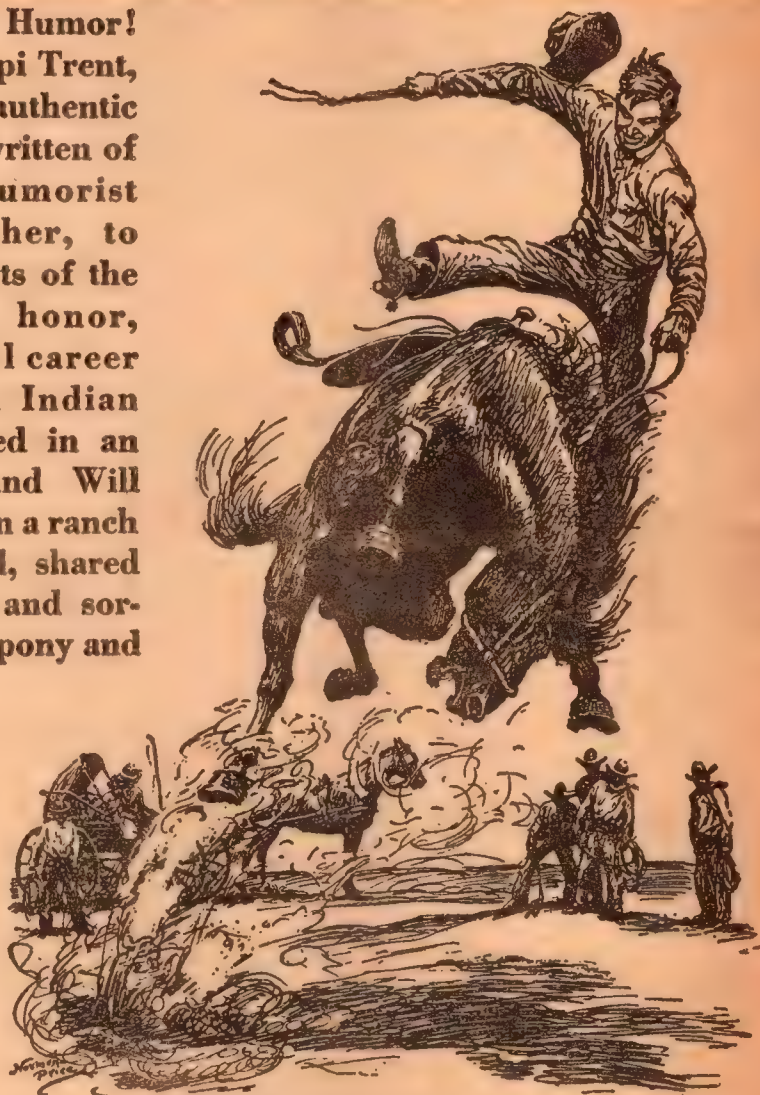
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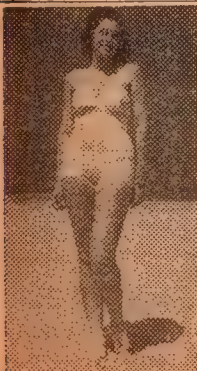
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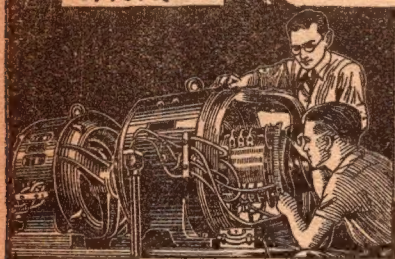
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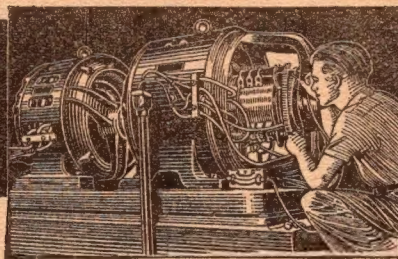
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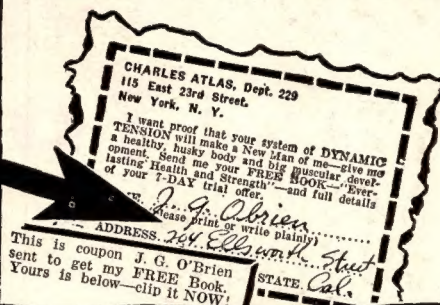
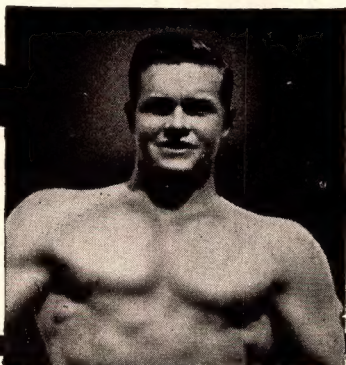
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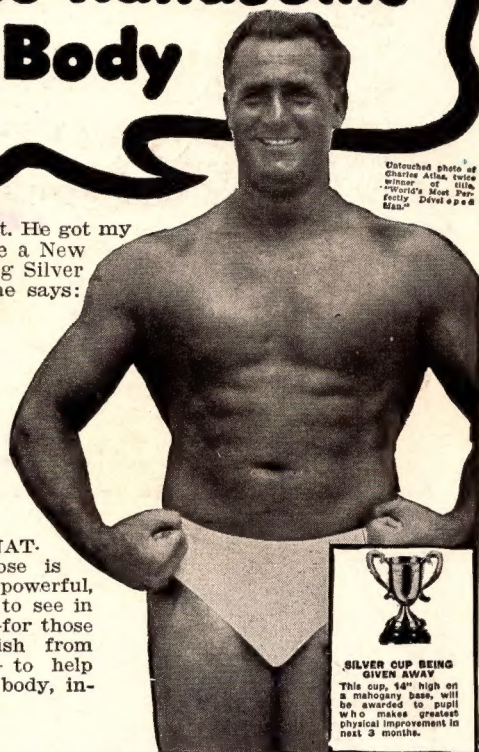
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